

THE BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY & ART OF ANIMATION

April
2006

ANIMATIONTM

MAGAZINE

**Ice Age 2
Heats Up the
CG Climate**

**Asia:
The Next
Wave**

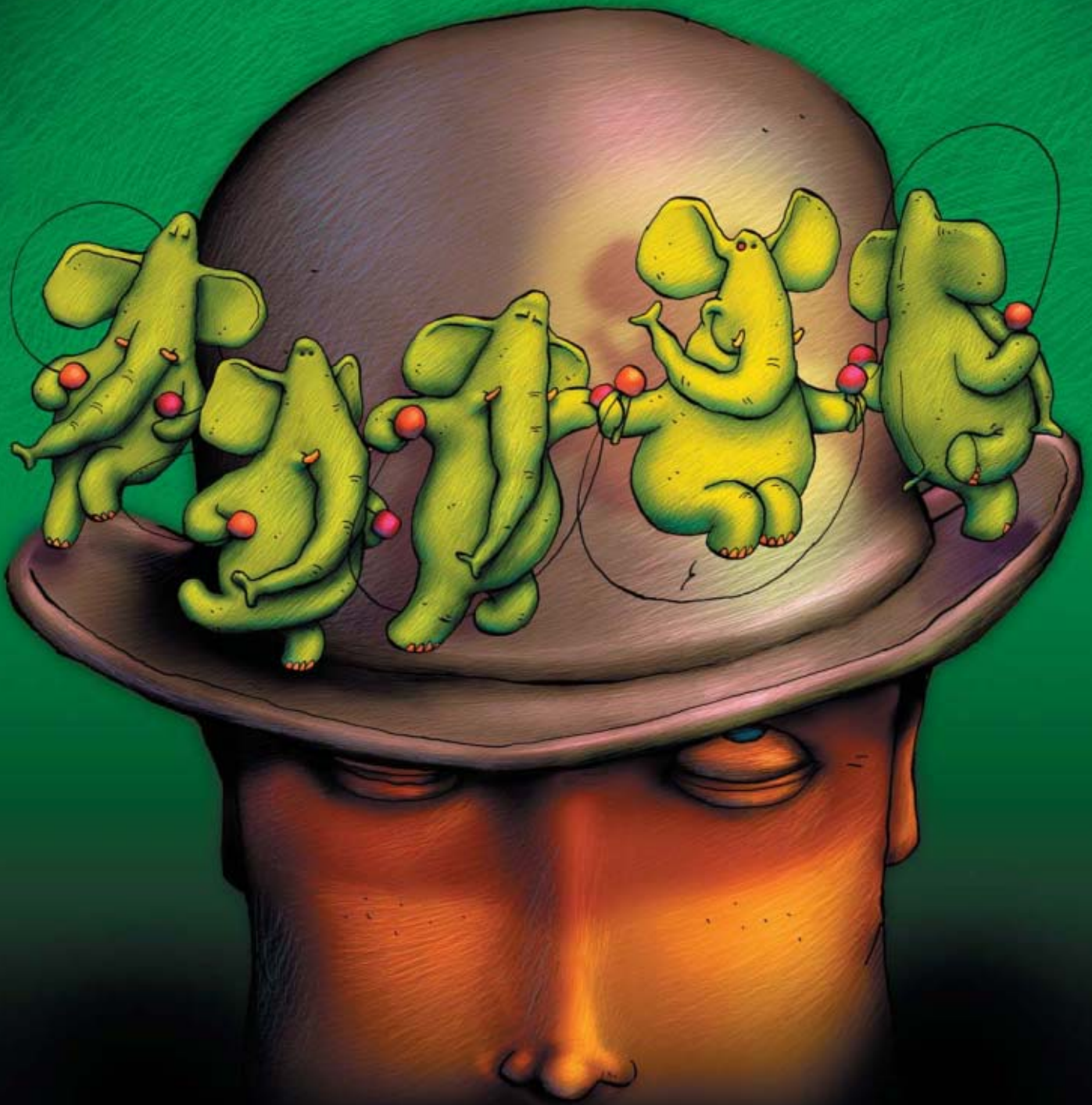
**Gaming
Trends
of 2006**



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ANIMATION MAGAZINE

Volume 20, Issue 4, Number 159, April 2006

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On the Cover:

Fox and Blue Sky take moviegoers on another delirious, CG-animated adventure with *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown*, directed by Carlos Saldanha.

Cartoon Movie Cover: Magma Animation and Europool GmbH bring their latest project *Bug Muldoon* to Cartoon Movie.



30



37



48



This month, everyone at the magazine was in a true Asian frame of mind as we prepared for our special March distribution at the Tokyo International Anime Fair and the Hong Kong International Film and TV Market. We were lucky to have experts such as Charles Solomon, Patrick Drzen, Tad Osaki, Thomas McLean and our own staffers Ryan Ball and Sarah Gurman search high and low for the latest trends and projects that are generating buzz in Japan, Korea, China, the Philippines and Singapore.

Of course, just like everybody else, we were surprised to read that China's State Administration of Radio, Film and TV has decided to ban TV series and films that featured real human actors interacting with animated characters. Our first reaction was "Whaaaaaaaah?" Our second impulse was to feel sorry for poor Jessica Rabbit, the hyperactive pooch from *Blue's Clues* and the whole Looney Tunes gang which seemed to genuinely enjoy the company of Michael Jordan, Brendan Fraser and Jenna Elfman.

We hope somebody starts a rally somewhere demanding equal rights for toons. Come on, people, can't we all get along? Didn't they watch *Crash*? And who's going to stop Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke and those neglected kids from *Mary Poppins* when they just have to jump into the animated chalk drawings in the park? We are just praying that somebody will sit that impressionable Dakota Fanning down and explain the ugly realities of the world to the young actress who seems to think nothing of mixing with the animated animals on the set of Paramount's upcoming *Charlotte's Web* movie.

Joking aside, experts believe that China is only trying to increase the demand for homegrown animation and to up the local production of Mandarin-



language shows. The country has a history of banning shows that include fantasy elements, especially films that center on talking animals such as *Babe* and *Garfield*.

Never before has there been a higher demand for communication between the East and the West. We hope *Animation Magazine* can play a small role in bridging the cultural gaps and help the talented people in Asia work together with Western

companies to expand co-productions and sales. Just please remember to leave Jessica Rabbit and little Dakota out of it, O.K.?

Ramin

Ramin Zahed
Editor-in-Chief
rzahed@animationmagazine.net

Quote of the Month



"In a refreshing departure from the animal heroes of most recent children's movies, this Curious George doesn't rap, punch out bad guys or emit rapid-fire commentary on pop culture. George is all monkey ..."

—From The New York Times capsule review of Matthew O'Callaghan's *Curious George* feature which made over \$33 million in its first two weeks at the U.S. box office.

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The Animation Planner

April

FRAME-BY-FRAME

1-2 Find shelter from the nonstop pouring rain in Seattle at the **Emerald City Comi-Con** (www.emeraldcity-comicon.com).



3-7 Find out what's on the TV animation and mobile content universe in Cannes, France, at the annual **MIPTV** and the new **Content 360** events (www.miptv.com).

4 The **Official Mobile Entertainment Summit** (www.ihollywoodforum.com) stays in Vegas, baby. **The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, Disney/Walden Media's holiday blockbuster is available on DVD today. Anime fans can check out Geneon's DVD release of **Viewtiful Joe, Vol. 2** and VIZ's **InuYasha, Vol. 40** and for fans of adult humor, there's Anchor Bay's **Tripping the Rift, Season 2**.



The Chronicles of Narnia



5-9 The romantic city of Positano, Italy is the backdrop of the annual **Cartoons on the Bay** festival (www.cartoonsbay.com).



11 A. A. Milne's delightful characters have another outing in **Pooh's Grand Adventure: The Search for Christopher Robin** on DVD, just in time for the bear's 80th anniversary. Spend your hard-earned cash on **Disney's Best Pals (Donald and Daisy, Mickey and Minnie, Mickey and Pluto); IGPX, Vol. 2** and **Zatch Bell, Vol. 3**.



The Wild

14 Tom Cruise, **War of the Worlds**, **The Village** and many other recent pop culture phenoms are spoofed in David Zucker's **Scary Movie 4**. Disney's latest CG feature, **The Wild**, comes to life with CORE's animation and the voices of Keifer Sutherland and Eddie Izzard.

18 Remember **Thundercats**? You can relive the second season (Vol. 1) of the show on a new Warner Bros. DVD release today!



20-22 Chat about the future, the art and technology of animation at the **Cartoon Masters** event in Vigo, Spain (www.cartoon-media.be). The **Vision Film Festival** in Roanoke, Virginia, has added a new animation category to the mix (www.blueridgeswvafilm.org).

Silent Hill



21 Another popular game becomes a movie. **Silent Hill**, directed by Christophe Gans and starring Radha Mitchell as a mother who loses her sick daughter in a strange town, opens in theaters today.

22-27 Get your tech act together at **National Assoc. of Broadcasters** confab in Las Vegas (www.nabshow.com). Oh yeah, that a.m. dude, Regis Philbin wins some kind of lifetime achievement award too!



25 Get out your credit card and get ready to spend, spend, spend: Some DVDs to consider: **American Dad, Vol. 1; One Piece, Vol. 2; Little Einsteins: Team up For Adventure** and **Inspector Gadget: The Original Series**.



27-May 2 If you happen to be in southern Germany, don't forget to check out the **Stuttgart Int'l Festival of Animated Film**, and please taste the local beer for us, OK? (www.itfs.de).

28-May 3 Hangzhou is the place to be for the **Second China Int'l Cartoon and Animation Festival** (www.cicaf.com).



Art School Confidential

28 Director Terry Zwigoff brings another famous Dan Clowes comic strip to the big screen in **Art School Confidential** starring Sophia Myles and John Malkovich.

To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail sgurman@animationmagazine.net

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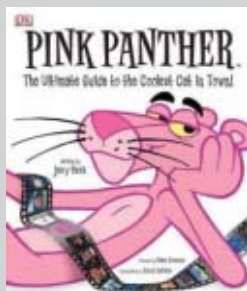
BOOKS WE LOVE

by Sarah Gurman

Pink Panther: The Ultimate Guide to the Coolest Cat in Town

By Jerry Beck
(DK Adult, \$24.99)

Animation historian and guide extraordinaire Jerry Beck (*The Animated Movie Guide*, *Looney Tunes: The Ultimate Visual Guide*) has delivered a comprehensive account of the exploits and wonders of our favorite pink feline over the past 40 years. The book breaks down the panther's comings and goings



Inspector Clouseau, Steve Martin.), detailing the history behind Panther films, comics, cartoons, memorabilia and the Depatie-Freleng Studio. Featuring a forward by director Blake Edwards, intro by David DePatie, an afterword by

by decade from the 1960s on (MGM's recent live-action release gets some attention, and there's also an interview with the new

animator Art Leonardi and oodles of fun facts and cool cat eye candy in between, Beck's resource book really gets to the heart of why the rosy rascal has had such a lasting impact in pop culture. This tome also gives fab Panther co-stars like the Ant and the Aardvark, Misterjaws and the Inspector their due page time and is really a much-needed accompaniment to the new MGM DVD release, *The Pink Panther Classic Cartoon Collection* featuring 124 toons (13 hours) as well as documentaries about the durable classic. And let's not forget DK's *Pink Panther Ultimate Sticker Book* (\$6.99)—come on, over 60 stickers and they're reusable! ■

Samurai 7 Ready to Rumble in Hi-Def

by Sarah Gurman

Samurai 7, FUNimation's anime of epic proportions, is set to debut March 1 for American audiences on ANIMANIA HD and will hit the cable airwaves via IFC on April 1. Putting a sci-fi spin on Akira Kurosawa's



Kirara the water priestess, her younger sister and fellow villagers Komachi and Rikichi set out to recruit any remaining samurai to fight the cyborg oppression.

The 26 high-def episodes of *Samurai 7* produced by GONZO Digimation will

1954 classic movie *Seven Samurai*, the series visits a desolate village in the future where the inhabitants are struggling to recover from a massive war while fending off the attacks of hybrid Nobuseri bandits. The Nobuseri are former Samurai who merged their living cells with machines during the war to create weapons and have now become corrupt with power. In a desperate move to save their land,

expand ANIMANIA HD's audience to young-adults 14-18, airing for one hour every Wednesday as part of the new "Animayhem" programming block. For IFC, the honor-defending property will help build on the theme of the network's longest running film strand, "Samurai Saturdays." ■

Samurai 7 airs Wednesdays at 9 p.m. on ANIMANIA HD. It premieres on IFC April 1 at 10:30 p.m.

BKN Unmasks Zorro

Animation company/distributor BKN has acquired exclusive rights to produce and distribute a new TV series and home-video feature based on the classic Zorro character. The deal with Zorro Prods. will see the masked Latino avenger brought to modern times with 26 animated episodes and a direct-to-DVD movie tentatively titled *Zorro: Generation Z*.



Zorro's trusty steed will be replaced by a sleek, black motorcycle as college freshman Don Diego rights wrongs in a modern-day city patterned after Los Angeles. No longer relying on his swordsmanship and athletic abilities alone, our hero reportedly will use high-tech gadgets including a Z-Pod and a Z-phone.

BKN, which will also handle worldwide merchandising and licensing for *Zorro: Generation Z*, will be presenting the \$8.4 million series and movie at MIPTV in Cannes this April. The company recently entered the home entertainment and new media distribution market with the formation of BKN Home Entertainment Ltd in the U.K. and BKN Home Entertainment Inc. in the U.S. The slate of animated feature films to be produced for distribution include *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *Kong II - Return to the Jungle*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Robin Hood*, *Jungle Book*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Nutcracker*. The company will also handle DVD releases for the full BKN catalogue, including such new TV series as *Legend of the Dragon*, *Kong—The Animated Series* and *Dork Hunters from Outer Space*. ■

—Ryan Ball



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The Dream Life of Brozers

Ancient culture inspires an Aboriginal original.
by Ramin Zahed

FRAME-BY-FRAME

An adventure-packed surfing trip Down Under could have far-reaching inspirational effects beyond expectations. Just ask French brothers Jerome and Cyril de Baecque, who came up with the idea for their beautiful animated project *The Rainbow Snake* during an Australian adventure in 2000. "We discovered the Aboriginal art on display at the Sydney Museum and literally fell in love with it," says Jerome de Baecque. "That was the starting point. Then we embarked on two years of research, which included reading many books about the culture and meeting with people in the art world."

Jerome joined forces with screenwriter Mathilde Annaud (daughter of noted French director Jean-Jacques Annaud) to flesh out a satisfying storyline based on

stage of development and are ready to start pre-production.

Set in the great plain of Papunya, *The Rainbow Snake* centers on 10-year-old twins Manoa and Djebek, who became orphans when their parents were transformed into rocks. Upon receiving a telepathic message from their parents, they embark on a journey across Australia to find the ancestral spirit of water (the Rainbow Snake) to save their clan from a terrible drought.

In 2003, the brothers launched their company Brozers Inc. in order to develop *The Rainbow Snake*, as well as another film titled *Troublemakers*. They are also working on other projects for TV, such as the CG-animated show *Kongzi*, which

squash animation. Character animation and foregrounds will be in CG, while most backgrounds will be in 2D and some sequences will involve hand-painted elements in the style of Aboriginal dot paintings."

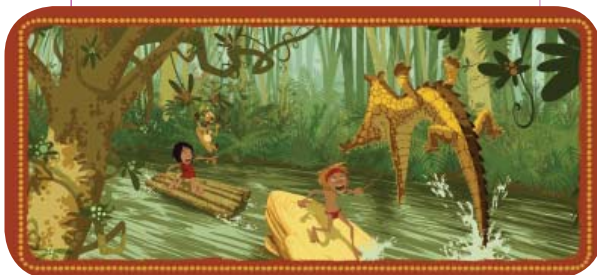
Jerome notes that ancient Aboriginal tales and legends have inspired the storyline and the culture's paintings and sculptures have influenced the design. "This culture is the oldest surviving form of spiritual art in the world," he adds. "For 60,000 years it has been passed on from one generation to the next. Today the Aborigines are trying to save their heritage through the distribution of their paintings around the world. We hope that our film will help their cause." ■

For more info, visit www.brozers.com

they will take to MIPTV next month. In March, they will present their feature project at the Cartoon Movie event in Germany to seek potential European partners. "At this stage, we don't have a set budget, but we think it will be around 10 to 15 million euros," says Jerome. "We see the production as a Toon-shaded CG feature and are aiming for highest level of stretch-and-

the rich Aboriginal ethnology and culture. "It took us over three years and around 20 versions, because we wanted to create a story for children that is fun and dynamic, but one that also expressed the richness and specificity of the culture."

The team moved on to the design stage last year with the aid of Pascal Valdes, a talented veteran of the business, who also served as the art director on Christian Volckman's acclaimed CG-animated feature, *Renaissance*. "Since he joined our team and discovered this amazing culture, he's also hooked," adds Jerome. "Now after spending four years, we have brought the film to an advanced



Hot Discs

Animated

1. The Lady and the Tramp: 50th Anniversary Ed. (Disney)
2. Wallace & Gromit: The Revenge of the Were-Rabbit (DreamWorks)
3. Ultimate Avengers: The Movie (Lions Gate)
4. Bambi II (Disney)
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AI's Got Game

The Art Institute of California-Los Angeles puts education in play at Game Center. **by Ryan Ball**

Strengthening its commitment to game art and design education, The Art Institute of California-Los Angeles recently opened the Game Center, a state-of-the-art facility where students can play the latest titles and prepare to bring tomorrow's hottest games to the masses. The Jan. 26 opening ceremony was well attended by both students and industry professionals who got a look at the latest developments and a glimpse of what's in store for students eager to enter the lucrative world of interactive entertainment.

The day-long event started with an exposition of new hardware, software, games and technology presented by Game Center partners and sponsors. Company representatives from such industry leaders as AMD, Autodesk Inc., Avid Computer Graphics, Luminetik Animation Studios, Nvidia Corp., Seagate Technology and wondertouch were on hand to talk shop and share their latest offerings while students seized the opportunity to network. Other participating companies include SilverStone, Tyan Computer Corp., ViewSonic, International Game Developers Assn (IGDA), Motion Analysis Corp., nPower Software, PC Unlimited, Peachpit Press, Pioneer (USA) and F. Dice.

"We are honored to have so many prestigious partners for the Game Center," says Laura Soloff, president of The Art Institute of California - Los Angeles. "All of the tools they have contrib-

Game Center houses the tools and technology for students who want to do extra research and preparation to get ahead of the game before entering the work force."

For the technology partners involved, the Game Center provides an opportunity to get their products in students' hands and forge crucial relationships with up-and-coming game talent. PC Unlimited president Allen Hodjat comments, "We are building advanced workstations tailored directly to professional animators, video editors and game developers. The Game Center puts us in direct contact with students and pros of the game development field, helping us to better understand their needs, and in turn, build more advanced systems."

IGDA Los Angeles chapter coordinator Jeff Lander adds, "The excellent equipment and facilities at the Center give students and members the ability to get hands-on experience with the tools used by the studios on high-end productions. I look forward to seeing some amazing results from this collaboration."

Following the expo, guests toured the new facility, which boasts a fully functional motion-capture studio featuring top-of-the-line cameras and other equipment donated by Motion



The Hash Inc. booth attracts a flock of inquiring minds at the Game Center opening.

Photo credit: Shahla Bebe

demonstrated what a handful of students can accomplish on a shoestring budget and a tight schedule that would make any developer cringe. And while the quality of the graphics and design level displayed could easily be passed off as professional product, it served as a mere taste of the talent that is going to be issuing forth from the program in the coming years.

One of the on-going activities of the Game Center is the Animation 21 Lecture Series, which brings game, animation and digital filmmaking professionals and celebrities together ten times a year to discuss their craft. According to Game Center industry liaison Bijan Tehrani, a host of other special programs will be added to the mix. "We are planning several events for the Game Center," he notes, "including a festival of best game animation, a game industry job fair, new game launch events and 'A Touch of GDC' to show the best of the Game Developers Conference in one day in L.A."

Commenting on the overwhelming turnout for the expo and ribbon cutting, dean of academic affairs Vi Ly enthuses, "I was so elated to see the industry support at The Art Institute's Game Center opening. It is evidenced that such a center is needed for the next generation of gamers, and we hope our small, efficient center will become an essential and integral part for future game designers."

"It was great to finally see the culmination of all the hard work and planning that went into the development of the Game Center," adds Eric T. Elder, academic director for the Game Art & Design program. "It was great to get all the positive feedback we received about the event and this new resource we have created."

Free membership to the Game Center is available to students of The Art Institute of California - Los Angeles, members of the IGDA L.A. chapter and industry professionals. To apply, contact Bijan Tehrani at (818) 613-4227 or btehrani@dipl.



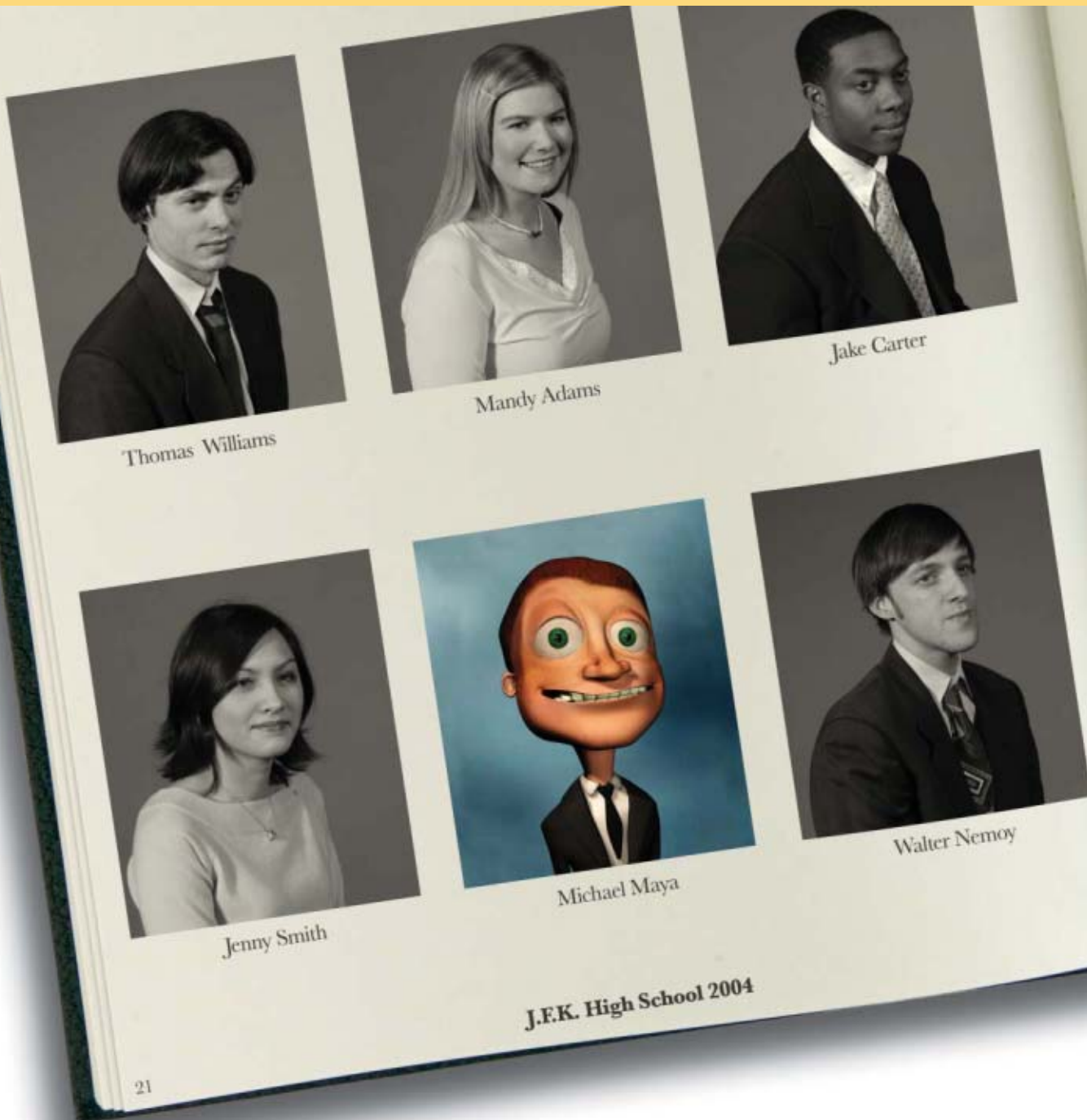
GAME CENTER

"In addition to what our students learn in the classroom, the Game Center houses the tools and technologies for students who want to do extra research and preparation to get ahead of the game before entering the work force."

--Laura Soloff, president of The Art Institute of California-Los Angeles

uted to our school provide a tremendous benefit to the students in our Game Art & Design and Media Arts & Animation programs. In addition to what our students learn in the classroom, the

Analysis Corp. There was also a private screening of work by Game Wizards, the student game development team at the Los Angeles campus in Santa Monica. An impressive presentation



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Five Game Animation Trends to Watch For

by Ryan Ball

When one compares an arcade classic like the original *Donkey Kong* to something like *Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie*, it's obvious that video game animation has come light years in just a couple of decades. As the game industry gradually rolls out the newest generation of consoles and titles, it's also clear that there's no limit to what artists will be able to do in the interactive space as the tools and technology get better and better. We spoke with various industry professionals to get an idea of what we can anticipate in the next few years and what technical advances are driving the new milestones and challenges in game animation.

Run-time technology

Gamers who spend any amount of time with one title are sure to start noticing the same canned animations cycling through, whether it's a devastating sword blow, a sick skateboard wipeout or a gut-wrenching wrestling take-down. This issue is being dealt with by NaturalMotion, whose endorphin is the only character animation software to utilize Dynamic Motion Synthesis, a technology based on artificial intelligence controllers that essentially allow characters to animate themselves in real time. While endorphin is used heavily by in the motion picture industry, the company is offering game makers a new product called euphoria, which promises to take animation out of the can and give gamers completely interactive characters for the first time.

"This is really a huge step for the company and for the games as well, because you're now moving away from having to pre-produce everything to actually seeing things in real-time as they happen on the screen" says NaturalMotion CEO Torsten Reil. The best example he can cite is American football games where all the tackles currently have to be pre-animated. With euphoria, however, they can be done in real-time and will always look different. "Whenever a tackle happens on screen, it's a unique tackle," he

states. "It all depends on what you've done—the angle, the speed of your body, the strength of your body, everything. It's not a matter of triggering animation #42.B or something."

NaturalMotion believes euphoria and run-time technology will revolutionize the way players respond viscerally to any given game. "The obvious effect," say Torsten, "is that the quality of the animation and interactivity is much higher, but we think there's something even bigger there. For the first time you have these unique game moments where you say, 'wow, I've just seen something that I know has never happened before and is never going to happen again in the same way.' The company will be demonstrating euphoria behind closed doors at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) in March.

Michel Kripalani, games industry manager for Autodesk's media and entertainment division, also identifies a shift from pre-created animations to those driven by parametric systems such as forward kinematics (FK) and inverse kinematics

(IK). "These technological improvements will give characters more fluidity and animation options as the system will not be stuck with a pre-defined set of 'baked' animations," he says. "Autodesk is continuing to develop high-end animation systems in 3ds Max, Maya and MotionBuilder through a variety of new technologies and techniques."



Total-Performance Mo-Cap

Motion-capture technology already plays a major role in video game animation, but we're told that the industry is seeing a major shift in how data needs to be captured for next-gen titles.

"Next-generation games platforms are delivering graphics capabilities at such a level that motion-capture in general and motion-capture of facial, full body and hands in particular has become crucial for game cinematic animation and more and more for in-game animation," says Jon Damush, VP and general manager of the entertainment division at VICON Motion Systems. "Couple the requirements for increased realism with the fact that schedules are not getting any longer for getting content out the door, and you now have a real need to capture entire performances at once. There's no longer time to motion-capture body, fingers and facial performances separately and put it all together later."

Damush boasts that the four mega-pixel cameras

and grayscale processing of VICON's MX 40 cameras has pushed motion-capture to the point where character motion can be recorded with incredible accuracy and detail. "We can put tiny markers on the face and fingers and larger markers on the body to capture a complete performance," he says. "Game producers can now work with a motion-capture performer and elicit full responses and emotions in the same way live-action film directors work with actors on set."

According to Damush, game and film customers are demanding higher and higher camera counts to capture performances in greater detail. "A games customer booking a job at our House of Moves motion capture studio, for example, has 100 VICON MX cameras that can be configured for total-performance capture for any workflow," he notes. "There's a new thinking for motion-capture and for using it in non-traditional ways like capturing a 'beat box' in 3D to provide music sync for a karaoke game. The bar is being raised with more performers, more complex props and more interaction, again now possible from a total-performance point of view."



Facing the "Uncanny Valley"

Autodesk's Kripalani, tells us one of the key hurdles game developers will face and eventually overcome in the next five years will be something called the "uncanny valley."

"The uncanny valley is the point at which a character becomes just close enough to photo-real and believable that it actually looks sort of creepy," he says. "Viewers find these types of characters to be uncomfortable whether in games or films, even if they are unable to put their finger on why things feel odd."

According to Kripalani, game artists will eventually climb out of this gorge with improvements in the subtle nuances of character animation and facial expressions, as well as more convincing hair and cloth.

We have seen issues regarding the uncanny valley phenomenon before in regards to the motion picture industry. The creepiness some viewers detect in photorealistic characters may have contributed to the failure of the CG feature *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* from Square and Sony Pictures. Some moviegoers has simi-



lar reactions to Warner Bros.' *The Polar Express*, which employed ImageMovers' performance-capture system.

Keeping Up with the Joneses (a.k.a Graphics)

As graphics get better and polygon counts continue to rise, animation naturally has to step up to the next level, according to Edge of Reality's Chad Hanchak, who served as senior animator on Activision's *Over the Hedge* game, based on



the upcoming DreamWorks Animation feature. On this front, he says the human factor is perhaps more important than technology.

"One of the biggest things I'm seeing is the need to emphasize the character as a real character and letting the player really connect with that [person], almost on a personal level," Hanchak remarks.

"Back in the day, you had characters that were just blocks and you accepted them as blocks and that was okay. But I think the player really wants to feel who they're playing now and, obviously, animation's going to play a huge role in that."

On the *Over the Hedge* game, Hanchak says there was a lot of going back and forth with co-workers to have other people feel out his work. "Instead of just trying to accomplish a jump or attack, you try to figure out what makes it feel different from all the other characters," he says. "We had four main characters on this game, for instance, and each one had to do all of the same moves but each had to feel like their own little guy."

The DVD Factor

In the 1980s Don Bluth's laser disc-based *Dragon's Lair* burst onto the scene and introduced a completely different kind of gaming experience. Today's equivalent is perhaps the emergence of the DVD board game, which creates yet another outlet for interactive animation. Since the movie trivia game *Scene It* blazed the trail, we've seen a number of contenders enter the market, which is rapidly expanding judging by the number of DVD board games unveiled at this year's Toy Fair in New York.

Animation plays a significant role in our games," says Brian Johnson, CEO of B1 Games. "We always strive to enhance the original property with animation. In the case of our *X-Men* DVD board game, we are taking existing comic books and giving them motion. We have an in-house creative staff of over 80 people bringing these images to life using Illustrator, Combustion, After Effects and Maya."

Johnson goes on to say that as license fees

for actual TV and film clips increase, more games are being done using animation. "We have produced several DVD Board Games where animation was the only way to bring it to life," he comments.

B1 hopes to make a splash in the online game realm as well with plans to develop web-connected HD DVD games. Currently, the company is working on games based on FOX's *24* and CBS's *Amazing Race*. Meanwhile, one of its competitors, the similarly named b-Equal, has licensed the DreamWorks Animation franchises such as *Shrek* and *Over the Hedge* for DVD board games that will also feature new animation.

With video games sales currently in a slump, this might just be the right time for DVD titles to move in and capture a bigger chunk of the home entertainment market. But don't count the first-person shooters and RPGs out. As game animation continues to improve, it can only increase the demand for experiences that pull people out of reality and immerse them into brave new worlds that only stings of zeros and ones can create. ■





A Second Mammoth Undertaking

The speed of development and animation on Fox/Blue Sky's *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* was anything but glacial.
by Michael Mallory

FEATURE

The makers of *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* (Fox Animation and Blue Sky Studios) want you to know that they are not presenting a story ripped from today's headlines. Despite what many reviewers are destined to read into the film when it is released March 31, the story of a pack of fur-clad heroes who struggle for survival through a globally warming, rapidly changing and suddenly dangerous world is not a deliberate parallel of our own recent hurricane-and tsunami-born disasters.

"It's a cartoon!" laughs executive producer Chris Wedge. "If you go to this movie with the expectation of seeing a lot of sharp critical allegory about what's going on in our world today, you may be disappointed."

Adds producer Lori Forte: "We definitely did not go into it saying, 'Let's do a story that's relatable to global warming'. But once you set up an ice age, you have to start thinking about what's going to happen to all of your characters once all this ice melts."

As they used to say in Hollywood: If you want to send a message, call Western Union. What *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* does represent, particularly for those who are



savvy about the process of making an animated feature, is something of a miracle birth. The film, which brings back the disparate tribe from 2002's *Ice Age*—Manny the mammoth (voiced by Ray Romano), Diego the sabertooth (Denis Leary) and Sid the sloth (John Leguizamo)—and adds new characters Ellie (Queen Latifah), a lady mammoth who thinks she is a possum, and Eddie and Crash (Josh Peck and Seann William Scott), her two gonzo adoptive brothers who really are possums, was completely animated in *eight months*.

The rush was in part to make sure that the memory of the original *Ice Age* did not melt from moviegoers' minds. "We wanted to remain within four years of the original

film," says Fox Animation president Chris Meledandri. "We believe that the first film had an enormous audience who really loved it, and we wanted to follow up with a film while it was still in their consciousness."

Meledandri adds that the studio also wanted to maintain the March release window that Fox Animation staked out with the first *Ice Age* and now virtually owns. (And, truth be told, *Robots*

ran a bit over schedule, carrying the crew with it.) Still, *eight months* to animate a feature?

Granted, the characters were already developed and modeled, but that was the extent of the re-use factor. The world of *Ice Age 2* is considerably different than the pristine, almost austere glacial environment of its predecessor. "The first movie was more of white blues than browns," says director Carlos Saldanha. "For this one we added a layer of green to it. We have forest, grass, flowers, elements that will take you a little more to a springtime feeling, which added a little more of the complexity to the look and took away a little bit of the simplicity of the graphic quality."



Chris Wedge



Lori Forte



Chris Meledandri

The simplicity of *Ice Age*'s story structure was maintained, though, with each of the characters having well-defined goals and/or problems. For Manny it is the possibility that his species will become extinct unless he can find a lady mammoth, and when he does, he can't stand her! Former antagonist Diego has a more pressing problem (Hint: Cats *hate* water), while the Scrat is still governed by his Sisyphean determination to open that infernal acorn.

A concentrated effort was made across the board to retain the stylized look of the first film while taking advantage of the advancements in technology—fur technology, in particular. “In the first film, the texture of the fur was painted on millions of invisible cards, so it had a sleek kind of quality to it,” says character designer Peter de Séve. “Here there were actually follicles grown onto them. The advantages are it looks much more real; the disadvantages are it looks much more real!”

Naturally, the skills of the animators evolved as well. “There is some incredibly entertaining animation in this movie that I wouldn't have dreamed of doing when we started doing the first one,” says Wedge. Alias Maya 6.5 was used for the character animation, while Blue Sky's proprie-

De SIGN by de SÉVE

Animated features normally employ an entire staff of character designers, but that tradition has been shattered by *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown*, for which complete control over character design was entrusted to just one artist: Peter de Séve.

An illustrator for books (*Finn McCool*) and cover artist for *New Yorker* magazine, de Séve's first foray into animation was Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Since then he has worked on such films as *Mulan*, *A Bug's Life*, and *Finding Nemo*. But it was with 2002's *Ice Age* that de Séve first went solo.

“I was one of a few designers who were invited to work on *Ice Age 1*,” he says. “After a few months of sketching for Chris Wedge, I found that I was the only character designer on the film.” Not only did the artist relish seeing his designs “undiluted by the melting pot process that had been the norm on other films,” but he was able to go beyond the design stage and work directly with the modelers, animators and riggers to bring the characters to life.

For *Ice Age 2*, de Séve designed more than 20 new characters, including a few that were initially pitched for the first film but were left on the drawing board. His biggest challenge, though, was differentiating the look of Ellie, the female mammoth, from that of Manny.

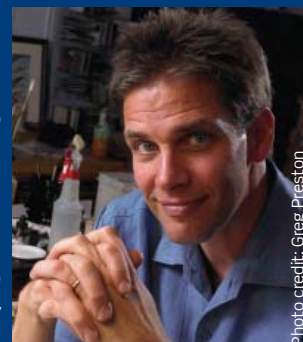


Photo credit: Greg Preston

“We went back and forth just trying to get Ellie right,” de Séve says. “You revise the eyes and do the eyelash thing, but at the same time you don't want to be obvious about it. So there are subtle things in the shape of her silhouette. Manny is made up



more of planes and straights, and she's got more curves and in the way her wig is shaped, and her tusks, which are much smaller.”

Currently de Séve is helping develop three more projects at Blue Sky, including a concept of his own, while awaiting the final rendering of *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown*. “I think this movie is going to look great and I'm very proud to have been a part of it,” he says. ■



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FEATURE



Carlos Saldanha



tary package CGI Studio was employed for rendering. While necessitating tweaks in lighting, color and volume (de Séve notes that applying the new fur technology to the existing model of Sid initially made him look obese.) the new fur technology allows for far greater realism in how the hairy coats relate to wind and water and even internal forces such as breathing. In one sequence, a baby mammoth's panicked breathing and the way her fur reacts to it creates a stunning effect.

The character who enjoys the most fur-to-element contact is the Scrat (voice, er, utterances provided again by Wedge), whose Buster Keatonish-mishaps intersect more closely this time around with the main storyline of the mismatched nomadic family. "The fur itself became a character we could animate," says Saldanha.

The entire production team has nothing but praise for and occasionally amazement at the hardworking Blue Sky crew, which included supervising animators Mike Thurmeier, Jim Bresnahan and Galen Chu, lead animator David Torres, art director Tom Cardone, fur supervisor Eric Maurer and effects supervisor Rob Cavaleri, who was responsible for channeling the film's vast supply of water. (The effects animation also had to be completed within that eight-month production period.)

"At the end of achieving every milestone it was a very emotional moment because I could see how much people cared about this movie," Saldanha says. "They put every drop of blood into this movie because they believed in it."

In one sense, Saldanha adds, the schedule turned out to be a good thing creatively. "Not having the luxury to wander around makes you go with your gut feeling more," he says. "I think at that level, maybe some of the stuff came out better than if I had milked it to the last minute." Still, he laughs and says, "I don't want them to make this a trend!" ■

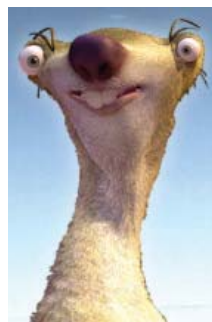
Michael Mallory is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in animation and visual effects.

Fox releases *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* in theaters nationwide on March 31. For more info, visit www.iceagemovie.com.

A Pre-hysterical Chat with John Leguizamo



Interviewing actor John Leguizamo, who returns in *Ice Age 2: The Meltdown* as the voice of the sibilant scene-stealer Sid the sloth, is like talking with an entire cast. One second he's John, and the next he's the clipped British narrator of the documentary on sloths that he used for research;



then he's Sid with his tongue being pulled out, for an *Ice Age 2* tie-in talking toy; and then he's a studio marketing wonk who, after 15 cups of coffee, dreams up the promotional stunt that will soon put him atop an iceberg in Alaska. (The stunt is apparently real, though the caffeinated exec is the product of Leguizamo's Energizer Bunny imagination.)

Creating wild, funny characters is the actor's stock in trade, and Sid is one that he loves. "We have an amazing chemistry between the three of us [he, Ray Romano and Denis Leary]," Leguizamo says. "It's so hard to come up with characters that have a really good chemistry and good interlocking neuroses" For *Ice Age 2*, he says that Sid finally feels like he is part of the surrogate family, but the part that is usually overlooked. "Sid feels like the middle child, the one that can't get noticed: He spends the whole movie trying to prove himself and stand out."

In addition to the aforementioned tongue-pull toy, Leguizamo has also lent his Siddian lisp (which he developed after learning that actual sloths store food in their mouths) to a wide array of other products and TV spots—unlike the situation from the first *Ice Age* outing. "Last time [Fox] didn't know they had a hit on their hands, so there weren't enough toys," he says. "Now we've got Burger King behind us and a ton of toys and video games!"

Who knew a sloth could be so industrious?

—Michael Mallory

A Taste of Europe

The continent's animated feature scene is alive and kicking at the eighth edition of Cartoon Movie. **by Ramin Zahed**

If you need a quick confirmation of how healthy the Euro animation business climate is this year, all you have to do is check out the lineup for this year's killer Cartoon Movie event in Potsdam, Germany (March 9-11). According to festival organizers, 11 films have been completed and 22 are in production or post stages in Europe. Twenty-three of these eclectic projects will be presented at the eighth edition.

"One interesting development is that the sequels to the two major films of recent years have both fulfilled their promise," note Corrine Jenart and Marc Vandeweyer, Cartoon Movie's managing directors. "*The Little Polar Bear 2* is admittedly not doing as well as the original film, but has nevertheless easily exceeded the million admissions mark and in Germany is doing almost as well as *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit*. The Kirikou character (star of Michel Ocelot and Benedicte Galup's sequel, *Kirikou and the Wild Beasts*) has become a social phenomenon in France. It is doing far better than the first film and has become a symbol of social integration."

The nine completed titles at the festival are Stefan Fjeldmark and Jesper Moller's *Asterix and the Vikings* (M6 Studio, France), Baltasar Pedrosa's *Gisaku* (Filmax Animation, Spain), Ocelot and Galup's *Kirikou and the Wild Beasts* (Les Armateurs, France), Angel de la Cruz and Manuel Gomez's *Midsummer Dream* (Dygra Films, Spain), Jorgen Lerdam and Anders Sorensen's *Pettson & Findus: The Tomte Machine* (TV-Loonland, Happy Life Animation AB, A. Film A/S; U.K., Sweden, Denmark), Thilo Rothkirch and Piet de Rycker's *The Little Polar Bear: The Mysterious Island* (Rothkirch, Cartoon-Film, Warner Bros. Ent. GmbH, Germany), Aurel Klimt, Bretislav Pojar, Vlasta Pospisilova

and Jan Balej's *FimFarum 2* a.k.a. *Fairy Tales 2* (MAUR Film, Czech Republic), Christian Volckman's *Renaissance* (Onyx Films, Luxembourg, U.K.) and Angel Izquierdo's *The Magic Cube* (M5 Audiovisual, Dziki Film Sp.; Spain, Poland). We've written about some of these features in previous issues, and we'll continue to highlight the rest throughout the year.

Cartoon Movie will also present an award for Best European Director of the Year, which finds Ocelot and Galup (*Kirikou*) competing against Nick Park and Steve Box (*Wallace & Gromit*), Jorgen Lerdam and Sorensen (*Pettson & Findus*) and Aron Gauder (*The District*). Gebeka, Mont-Blanc, Mikado and Folkets Bio are up in the Best Euro Distributor Category, while Dygra Films, M6 Studio, TV-Loonland/Happy Life and Aardman duke it out for the Best Euro Producer of the Year award.

The organizers do have a strong point when they point out that "it is getting harder and harder to talk about productions in terms of 'countries' because these features are often European co-productions with cross-border cooperation—this being one of Cartoon Movie's major objectives when it was set up."

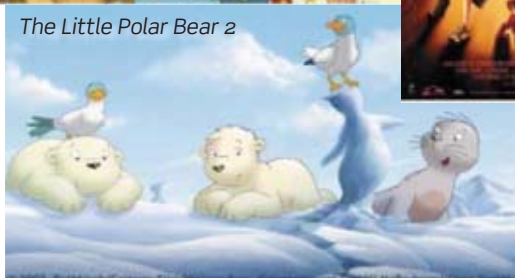
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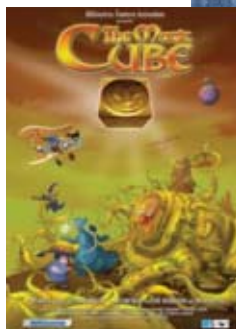
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Asterix and the Vikings



The Little Polar Bear 2



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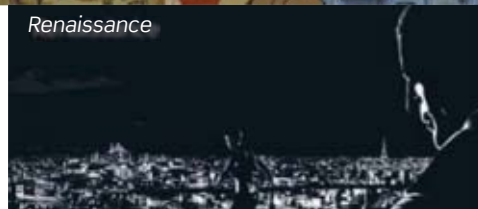
Kirikou and the Wild Beasts



Midsummer Dream



Pettson & Findus



Renaissance

FEATURE



Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo



was pared down to 26 weeks. This explains the high-octane action level of the series as did his having earlier animated another western-lit-inspired series, based on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

While Dezaki's visual style will be immediately recognizable to fans of his work, the look of *Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo* looks like no anime anyone's ever seen. Like *Hakugei*, it's a 26-part series that gives a science fiction twist to Alexandre Dumas' novel, while retaining much of the plot and the characters. The striking look, however, is the result of the collaboration between Gonzo Digimation and Asian-American fashion designer Anna Sui.

"I visited Gonzo Digimation in Tokyo during our Anna Sui fragrance launch in Japan," Sui says. "We had just done a comic book collaboration with Dark Horse Publications in the United States and the use of my original designs made the characters quite fashionable. When Gonzo Digimation approached me with the concept of combining forces, this seemed to be a natural progression to go from the printed page to a full-motion video animation."

Designing "period" costumes, set in the future but looking back to the 19th century,

continued on page 20

West Meets East: Thoughts on America and the New Anime Wave

by Patrick Drazen

It's a sign of the times. More anime productions in Japan are showing signs of western involvement. Some believe that the new presence of American co-producers is coloring the innate Japanese flavors of these productions, while retaining their unmistakable style and quirks.

Two series are based on western literary classics with a science fiction twist. *Hakugei: Legend of the Moby Dick* time-warps from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to a future where "whale hunters" are salvage astronauts who round up derelict starships (occasionally stealing some of the cargo, giving them a reputation as pirates). The one-legged, eyepatch-wearing Captain Ahab is the greatest whale hunter in the Nantucket Nebula, and this series tells of his hunt for the *Moby Dick*, a whale-shaped prototype starship capable of destroying entire planets. (Like many modern anime, there's a hidden government agenda, so this whale hunt isn't as simple as it sounds.)

Hakugei, originally broadcast in Japan in 1997, is directed by anime veteran Osamu Dezaki, an animator with experience on both sides of the Pacific. Not only did he direct various titles based on manga by Osamu Tezuka (most notably the *Black Jack* videos and the 1980 *Astroboy* remake), he was also behind one of the *Rainbow Brite* projects. Dezaki, who had previously tried to adapt Melville's

novel, was approached by Shueisha Publishing to write a how-to guide for anime directors.

"I tried to create a story and write a book that used it to explain the flow of production from conception to screenplay and storyboards all the way to animation," Dezaki explains. "Doing that, I tried to deal with *Moby Dick* again, but for various reasons I thought I'd try giving it a science fiction flavor. After that, producer Tetsuo Katayama who I go way back with was like, 'You went to all the trouble of making up the project, so...' So I got up my enthusiasm and we decided to animate it."

Dezaki planned a 39-episode run, which

*Hakugei:
Legend of the
Moby Dick*



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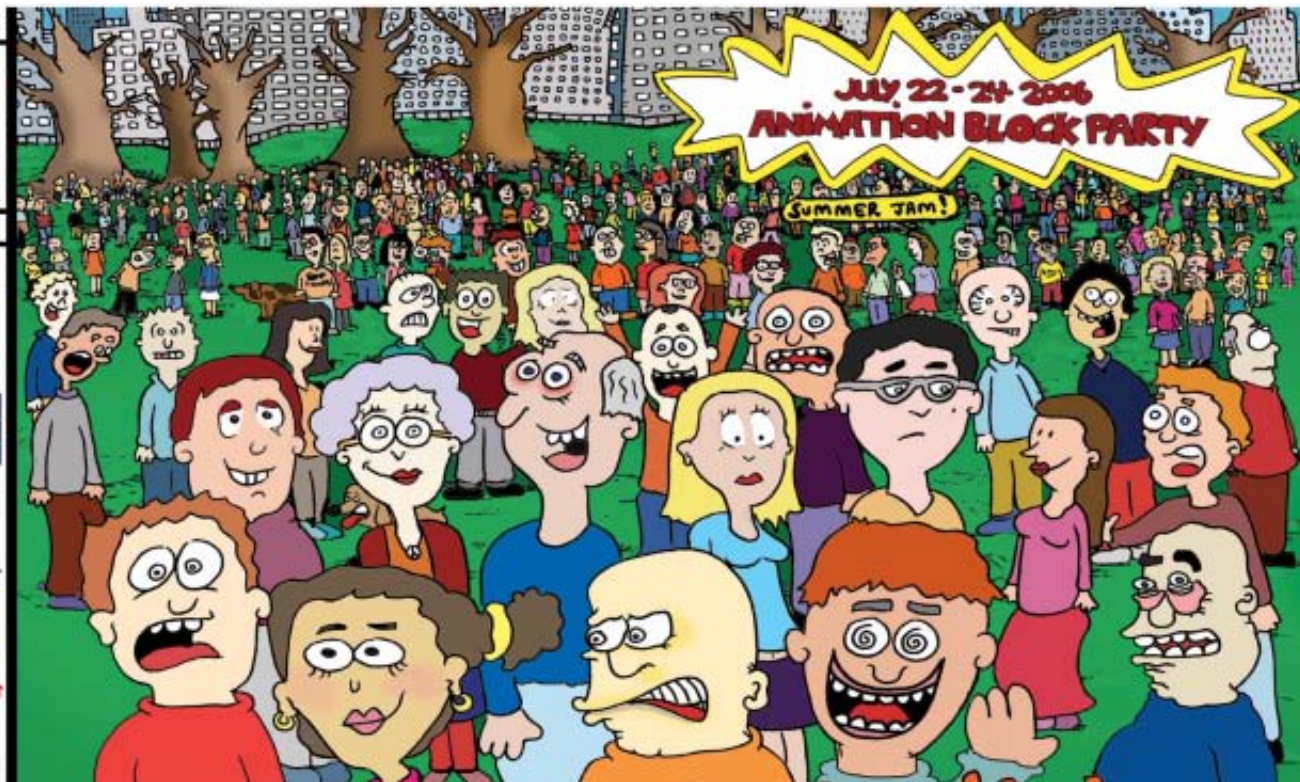
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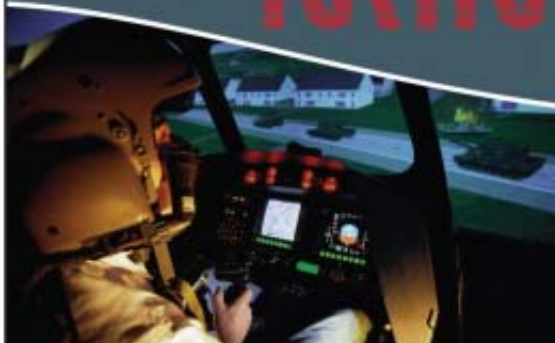
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West Meets East

continued from page 18

was the biggest challenge for Sui. "The emergence of the so-called 'dandy' with the top hat and cane made use of accessories as fashion statements. The widening of dresses, the gathering of fabric, the use of ruffles and the belted waist all contributed to a new 'look.'"

The third series, now showing in Cartoon Network's Toonami block, suggests yet another future: giant robots in a three-on-three roller derby on a 60-mile ever-changing track. This concept, and entire idea for *IGPX*, the ac-



ronym (kinda) for "Immortal Grand Prix," was developed in 2003 by Sean Akins and Jason DeMarco originally for a five-part animation for Toonami. The CGI was done by Production I.G., the studio responsible for the classic *Ghost in the Shell*. In 2004, DeMarco recalls, "We went back [to Production I.G.] and said, 'What if we made a show with you guys?'" Akins and DeMarco collaborated with director Mitsuru Hongo, mechanical designer Kenji Teraoka and Production I.G. writers to create the 13-episode series—a rare case in which Americans participated in the creation of an anime, not

merely in post-production. Hongo praised his collaborators, who traveled to Japan monthly for meetings: "Sean and Jason are big fans of anime and they really like what I make. It's actually much easier to work with them than companies I've been working with in Japan."

Will west-east cooperation be the way of the future? Stay tuned... ■

Patrick Drzen is a Chicago-based writer who specializes in anime. He is the author of *Anime Explosion! The What? Why? & Wow! of Japanese Animation* (\$18.95, Stone Bridge Press).

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Look Out, Godzilla. Here Comes *Negadon*!

New film brings CG to the classic Japanese monster movie.

by Ryan Ball

If you've seen *Godzilla: Final Wars* or any other recent entries in the giant monster genre known as "Kaiju," you've no doubt noticed a lot more CG animation and digital effects creeping in to augment the traditional man-in-suit monster brawls. But when Hollywood's attempt at replacing the clunky rubber costume with a CG Godzilla failed, it seemed fans would accept no substitute for good, old-fashioned "suitimation." That is, until *Negadon: The Monster From Mars* invaded the planet.

Negadon is the brainchild of animator Jun Awazu, who set out to use computer animation to capture all the style and nostalgia of a 1970s Japanese monster movie, even though he feared resistance from the faithful.

"Regardless of recent progress in visual effects by CG, many Kaiju fans have a strong affection for traditional suitimation, marionette-like props and miniature work," Awazu tells us. "So, I thought they might either welcome this all-CG work as the birth of new Kaiju movie, or criticize it as blasphemy to the tradition. The result was that many of them accepted it because the CG reproduced the excellent points of the traditional techniques."

This mixture of old-school charm and the latest advances in Japanese animation paid off for Awazu as word of his film quickly spread around the world with help from fanboy websites and enthusiastic reviews from those fortunate enough to catch a screening



in Japan. The 20-minute flick was picked up by ComixWave for worldwide distribution and was recently acquired by leading anime distributor Central Park Media for theatrical and home video release in North America.

As with any "overnight" success, *Negadon* was a long time in the making, 28 months to be exact. Awazu did it all himself on a PC using Autodesk's 3ds Max 5.1, Adobe/After Effects 6.5 (Professional Version), and a few choice plug-ins including Digimation's Shag for hair, Red Giant Software's Knoll Light Factory for reflection effects and RE: Vision Effects' Twixtor for frame-rate tweaking.

Awazu says the hardest part was

modeling and animating the human characters, since he'd had little experience with photo-real people. He tells us he wanted to bring a degree of exaggeration to the models without going to the extremes that Manga often does. "It was difficult to find the well-balanced point," he notes. "It took a lot of trial and error to get it right."

Though he's surprised by all the attention *Negadon* has been getting, Awazu feels a lot of it has to do with a growing public curiosity with Kaiju, an old concept but a new buzzword to many. The genre has been recently parodied in music videos and live Kaiju wrestling matches have become popular in certain hipster circles, but he believes that Japanese giant monster movies have slipped into a state of decay and fans are looking for the next big thing to jumpstart things, much like Godzilla needs a jolt of nuclear power every now and then.

Whether or not *Negadon* kicks off a new era in Kaiju, it has captured the imagination of science-fiction and animation fans around the world who have caught glimpses online and can't wait to see more. The movie seems to have tapped into something Awazu identifies as "Kacchoii," a Japanese word meaning "cool." He

remarks, "Kacchoii is a primitive feeling—one which Japanese kids use as the most important criteria in selecting toys and TV programs."

Released theatrically in Japan in October of 2005, *Negadon* won the Outstanding Production Award at the 20th Digital Contents Grand Prix and was named a Jury Recommended Work at the 2005 Japan Media Arts Festival. Set for release in the U.S. theatrically this spring and on home video this summer, the film is sure to open many doors for Awazu, who hasn't yet decided what he wants to do next. Judging by *Negadon*, however, we can be sure that whatever it is, it's going to be totally Kacchoii. ■



Viewtiful Joe

A Cultural Give and Take

The real world could learn a few lessons in harmonious co-existence and blending of cultures from animated series that glide easily between Asian and Western traditions.

by Charles Solomon

A slacker dude in cargo shorts and multiple earrings gets a magic watch that transforms him into a superhero; two Japanese pop stars pursue their careers in brightly-colored, stylized animation; a boy learns to control the elements of fire, earth, air and water to fulfill his destiny and restore balance to the world; a beat-boxer with an Elvis pompadour proclaims his imminent rise to fame—in Tokugawa, Japan.

Which shows are Japanese and which are American?

The first and fourth, *Viewtiful Joe* and *Samurai Champloo*, are Japanese; the second and third, *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi* and *Avatar the Last Airbender*, are from the U.S.A. All four illustrate the cross-pollination between American and Japanese animators that's producing some imaginative hybrids all over the digital landscape.

The scruffy hero of *Viewtiful Joe* sports a goatee, a backwards baseball cap and a demeanor that suggests a California skateboard park, rather than

Tokyo. "*Viewtiful Joe* is a perfect example of cross-pollination, starting with the title, which was conceived in English," says Grant Moran, head writer on the English version of the series. "Most of the iconic movie realms Joe visits are American. There's a ton of English in the original production, including his catchphrases, '*henshin a go-go, baby*' and '*cheeseburger, please.*'"

When the Japanese animation industry began taking off in the '60s, many of their characters looked like they'd been hired from Hanna-Barbera: Speed Racer resembled a young Tony Curtis. The current dialogue is more reciprocal.

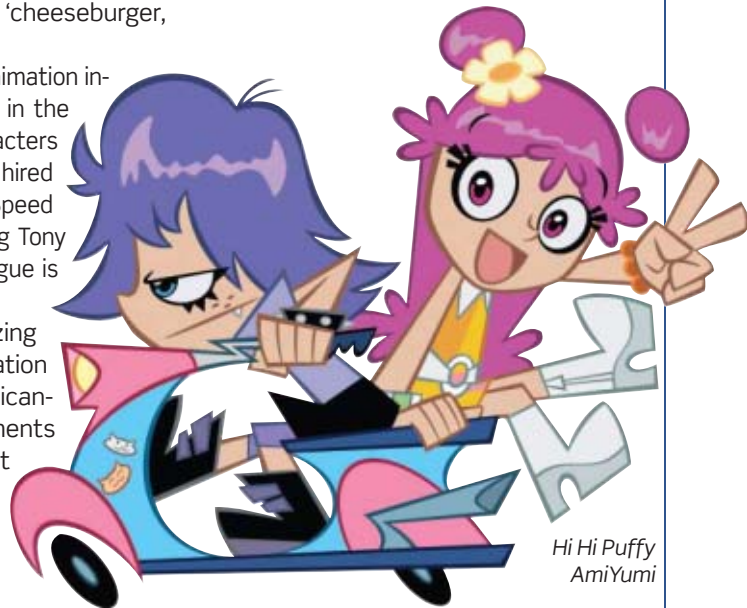
"People are recognizing that cross-pollination doesn't lead to an Americanization of Japan," comments Ian Condry, assistant professor of Japanese cultural studies at MIT. "The Japanese take

things and transform them into something uniquely their own. It dates back to borrowing their writing system from China in the 700s and extends to poetic forms and Buddhism, as well as music, film, comic books and animation."

"Japan and America are borrowing from each other: it's happening both ways. I think it's a product of importing anime shows and having them become hits," agrees Bob Higgins, senior VP of programming and production for Cartoon Network. "*Pokémon* and *Dragon Ball* started the trend; as they became successful, you saw American producers taking influences from them. Conversely, you're seeing more Americanized storytelling and character design in Japanese animation. If you look at *Dragon Ball*, then at new series like *Naruto* and *One Piece*, you can see the difference."

The heroines of Cartoon Network's *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi* are based on pop stars Ami Onuki and Yumi Yoshimura. "Anime was just the beginning of Japanese culture to come to the United States. Now J-pop culture and music are poised to be the next big thing," asserts series creator and executive producer Sam Register.

In the cartoons, Ami is upbeat and resourceful; Yumi is cooler and more cynical. As they tour the world in their elaborate bus, they encounter everything from overly enthusiastic fans to

Hi Hi Puffy
AmiYumi

vampire Goths and psychotropic sushi. The elegant, minimal designs owe more to the UPA cartoons of the '50s than to Japanese sources. A dubbed version of *Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi* now airs on Tokyo's Oha Star block and on Cartoon Network, so the cycle is complete.

If *Puffy AmiYumi* suggests a Japanese series with American visuals, Nickelodeon's *Avatar the Last Airbender* feels like an American series in Asian trappings. A century after the Fire People began a war of conquest against other tribes, Katara, a young Waterbender, and her brother Sokka find a boy with a shaved head frozen in the ice. When Katara revives him, she discovers his name is Aang and that he is the last Airbender—and the long-lost Avatar.

Although *Avatar* features a lot of pseudo-martial arts mumbo-jumbo, the characters are pure 21st century America. Katara, the last member of her tribe to possess Waterbending skills, is an assertive smart-mouth; ineffectual doofus Sokka supplies comic relief. But the character designs, the look of the series and the basic premise reflect the influence of anime.

Co-created and exec produced by Michael DiMartino and Byran Konietzko, both of whom are fans of Asian anime, the show premiered on Nickelodeon on February 21, 2005, and has developed a strong cult following, al-



Avatar: The Last Airbender

Courtesy: Nickelodeon

though it doesn't look or feel like any of the other Nick cartoons. Paramount released a first volume of episodes from the first season on DVD in January and will deliver a second package on March 28.

The most intriguing and complex example of the trans-Pacific cross-pollination is *Samurai Champloo*, from director Shinichiro Watanabe (*Cowboy Bebop*). An outrageous mixture of martial arts combat and hip-hop irreverence, *Champloo* brings together three misfits



Samurai Champloo

in Edo-era Japan. Jin, a taciturn ronin, is an icy, deadly swordsman. Low-life vagabond Mugen is equally dangerous, but his moves incorporate break dance spins and flips. Ditsy waitress Fuu compels them to help her search for a mysterious samurai "who smells of sunflowers." Many of the trio's adventures are set to a hip-hop soundtrack.

"I believe samurai in the Edo period and modern hip-hop artists have something in common. Rappers open the way to their future with one microphone; samurai decided their fate with one sword," Watanabe told the *The New York Times*. "I've been interested in hip-hop since it first appeared: the fact that it was born not in the music industry but on the street, the idea of using a turntable as an instrument, singing vividly about real-

ity instead of typical love songs and its links to graffiti and dance."

Condry notes that the cross-pollination has largely been restricted to the graphics and tone of individual series; *Samurai Champloo* takes the cultural mixing much further.

"Watanabe used the idea of sampling and remixing as part of the storytelling technique in *Samurai Champloo*," he concludes. "In Episode 8, when the beat-boxer Nagamitsu talks about the famous samurai he could beat (including Jin), he's actually sampling the names and images of actors from 70's TV shows. Watanabe takes the idea of sampling and remixing from hip-hop, but he does the same thing the DJs do, which is reinvigorate the work of an earlier era. In this case, it's not music but television. I think it represents another way of thinking about cross-pollination, not in terms of look and feel, but in terms of technique and even ideas of what creativity and originality can mean." ■

Charles Solomon is a Los Angeles-based animation expert and the author of *The History of Animation* and *The Disney That Never Was*.

All Eyes Focus on Animated Japan

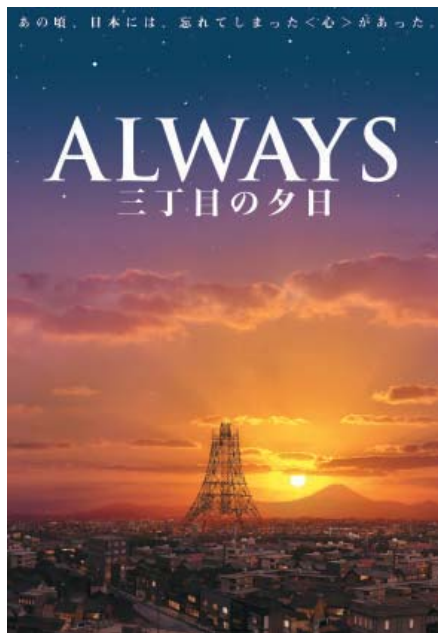
Despite the shrinking air time on Japan's terrestrial channels, anime continues to cast its global spell. **by Tad Osaki**

TOKYO Although on Oscar night Hayao Miyazaki's magical feature *Howl's Moving Castle* faces tough competition from the claymated heroes of Nick Park and Steve Box's Aardman feature and the otherworldly creations of Tim Burton, the movie has already proved its financial staying power. The film was released in Japan in November 2004 (followed by a June 2005 release in the U.S., courtesy of Disney) and has topped the 2005 Japanese box-office list with \$166 million in ticket sales. That means *Howl* is following in the footsteps of Miyazaki's Oscar-winning masterpiece *Spirited Away* (2001), which brought in \$257 million and was the best-selling movie (in all genres) in Japan.

This year in Japan a new movie is poised to capture the same kind of attention. This year's hit sensation is Nippon Television Network Corp.'s *Always: Sunset on Third Street*, directed by Takashi Yamazaki (*Returner*, *Juvenile*), based on a popular manga published in the biweekly magazine *Big Comic Original* by Shogakkan pub house. Perhaps because manga fans have been familiar with the comic book since 1973, the movie has generated over \$28 million at the box office since it was released by Toho last November. It ranked seventh in the list of Japan's most popular movies of last year.

The original manga by Ryohei Siagan chronicled the everyday lives of common people in downtown Tokyo during the late 1950s and was so popular that it inspired 45 volumes, which sold millions of copies in the country. Not surprisingly, the film has been nominated in 14 Japan Academy Award categories including best picture, director, screenplay, actor and actress.

A graduate of Tokyo's Asagaya Art College, the 40-year-old Yamazaki told *Variety* last month that he believes his film is a new type of CG-animated feature. "The CG supports the story—it's not what people come to see," he explained. "It's like the music or the color cin-



Flashback: Takashi Yamazaki's blockbuster feature *Always: Sunset on Third Street* relies heavily on CG effects to recreate 1950s-era Tokyo.

ematography. People do go to see Hollywood films for their CG effects ... but we can't imitate the Hollywood style," he says.

Always wasn't the only manga-based property capturing the attention of Japanese audiences last year. Kozueko Morimoto's *Gokusen*

managing director of TMS, one of the top three anime houses in Japan.

The company produced three top-rated series in 2005 and increased its annual revenues by 20 percent to a total of \$138 million. TMS is preparing to market one of the three new projects—*Mushiking*—to American audiences. Based on the popular Sega game, *The King of Beetles*, the 52x30 series centers on a brave group of forest beetles who fight against evil spirits in a futuristic setting. The company will offer *Mushiking* as well as two other anime titles *Angel Heart* (airing on Yomiuri TV in Osaka since last August) and *Fighting Beauty Wulong* (TV Tokyo) to the MIPTV market next month.

"The key to success in today's fragmented market is the anime house's ability to increase synergy of manga, anime and gaming to win the hearts of overlapping demographic groups," observes Yoshida. However, this convergence has generated its own challenges. Satoko Sasaki, deputy director of leading anime house Toei Animation Co. says that game-anime conversion has made determining merchandising rights a much more complex field.

A case in point is the *Dragon Ball* series, one of Toei Animation's hit properties, which started its life as a video game, then was later re-made after it hit the U.S. market. Determining the rights of a property in the gaming/anime/TV series arenas remains a challenging task. Sasaki adds, "Broadband distribution has made the rights issue even more time consuming."

Toei Animation, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, has 156 TV series and 202 anime features (a total of 4,300 hours) under its belt. It's now aggressively promoting the current hit, *One Piece*, which airs on Fuji TV's

"The lines that divide anime, manga and gaming are more blurred now than ever."

—Satoji Yoshida, TMS's managing director

series, which was adapted to a Nippon TV drama series in 2002 and 2005, inspired a new animated project (by Madhouse), and garnered high ratings on TV.

Some observers of the animated culture scene in Japan note that it's no longer easy to classify genres and media. "The lines that divide anime, manga and gaming are more blurred now than ever," says Satoji Yoshida,

Sunday 7-7:30 p.m. slot, to the U.S. market. The show has found a devoted following both on 4Kids TV and Cartoon Network in the past. Other Toei titles doing well Stateside are *Zatch Bell* and *Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo* (both on Cartoon Network's sizzling Saturday night Toonami block) and *Magical DoReMi* (on 4Kids TV).

Another major anime player in the country is Nippon Animation, which is known for its



Big in Japan: Among the country's hot animated titles—clockwise from top left—are *Magical DoReMi* (Toei), *Angel Heart* (TMS), *Cosette* (Nippon), *Mushiking* (TMS), *Gokusen* (Madhouse), *One Piece* (Toei), *Fighting Beauty Wulong* (TMS), *Penelope tete en l'air* (Nippon) and *Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo* (Toei).

Chibi Maruko Chan series of anime sitcoms and children's picture books. Masao Kurosu, the company's international director, believes there's a scarcity of animated fare created for preschool audiences on Japanese TV. That's one of the reasons he is preparing a series of five-minute episodes titled *Penelope tete en l'air*, based on the books by Anne Gutman and Georg Hallensleben, for release later this year. Also in the works for 2007 is *Miko and Mimiki*, another five-minute series based on a German picture book by Brigitte Weninger and Stephanie Roehe.

Nippon hit a snag in its attempt to co-produce *Cosette*, (an anime project based on Victor Hugo's classic *Les Misérables*) with China's CCTV a few years ago because of the SARS epidemic in addition to complex Chinese regulations. The company plans to produce 16 episodes of *Cosette* on its own for a Japanese network and satellite TV and for distribution in Europe by this fall.

Many of the animation insiders in the country, however, note that it's difficult to secure a spot on local terrestrial TV outlets for family-type anime shows. Even TV Tokyo which has 34 anime slots a week (mostly in primetime) has lowered the price it pays anime houses by more than half of what the price used to be in its peak.

Kurusu points out that anime houses are venturing into more co-production ventures to hedge the costs. "We need to nurture good overall producers who are capable of planning, coordinating with other financial resources such as advertisers and co-producers and combining all the necessary resources like video and DVD sales," he says.

Besides the shortage of anime outlets on local TV, animation houses are also worried about the next generation of artists. While Korea has over 130 college courses on anime and manga-related subjects, there are few institutions in Japan that offer similar training. Unlike many other Asian and European countries, there are very few government subsidies and protective measures for the local anime industry in Japan.

To address this problem, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government recently launched a new program to nurture young anime creators, in association with the content-developing venture, Think Corp. The new Anime Innovation Tokyo will prepare a \$2.5 million fund to produce and globally distribute pilot versions of new projects by young animators. Tokyo Met Government will foot one-third of the fund while Think will operate the program and secure remaining coin from financial companies, recruiting anime for the project, developing

sales channels and also forming limited liability partnerships (LLP) so creators can participate in profit-sharing with small investments of their own. The project will run for four years beginning this month.

Yuji Mori, president of Think, explains that he developed the LLP idea based on examples in the U.S. when he produced, with his executive producer Hiroaki Takeuchi (former editor of *Shonen Jump* comic magazine,) a 22-minute project titled *Hoshi no Koe* for satellite TV in 2002. "That's when we realized how important the market test is for anime," adds Mori. Helping Mori with his project is former L.A.-based Warner Bros. and phuuuz executive Ken Duer who has overseen the launch of titles such as *Animatrix*, *Lupin the Third* and *Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Monsters* in the U.S.

More announcements about future animated projects and features will be made at the Tokyo International Anime Fair (March 23-26), which is estimated to bring 220 international and local businesses and organization to the city's Big Sight venue. You can read more about the event and new Japanese projects in the pipeline in the May issue of *Animation Magazine*. ■

Tad Osaki is Animation Magazine's Tokyo-based correspondent. He specializes in animation and Japanese entertainment.



Zodiac—The Race Begins

Is Singapore the New Toon Power Spot?

by Patrick Drazen

Singapore connoisseurs have long praised the beautiful island nation for its impressive skyline, its Esplanade building, its exquisite multicultural restaurants and its top-notch shopping centers. These days, however, the country located at the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula is out to make its name in CG animation, with three pricey features leading the charge.

The Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) is investing \$1 billion towards developing the animation industry through 2018. The EDB will push ahead with key strategies such as attracting more top-tier digital media companies to set up shop in Singapore and encouraging local players with high growth potential to export

their content, building a world-class talent base, investing in leading technology R&D activities and encouraging financial institutions to manage their digital media funds from Singapore.

Consider Cubix Pictures, makers of Singapore's first CG animated feature, *Zodiac—The Race Begins*. The movie, made in 18 months at a cost of \$2 million, is a loose retelling of a centuries-old tale about the twelve animals of the Chinese lunar calendar racing to see who would be first in line. The film was offered at the Cannes Film Market in 2005 and, on the strength of a ten-minute trailer, deals were in place on the second day for distribution to countries as varied as Portugal and Israel, Greece and Thailand, as well as the Chinese mega-market.

"We received numerous offers from world buyers and we are still negotiating other deals," said Benjamin Toh, CEO of Cubix International, the parent company of Cubix Pictures. "We are confident that we will be able to successfully market the movie globally."

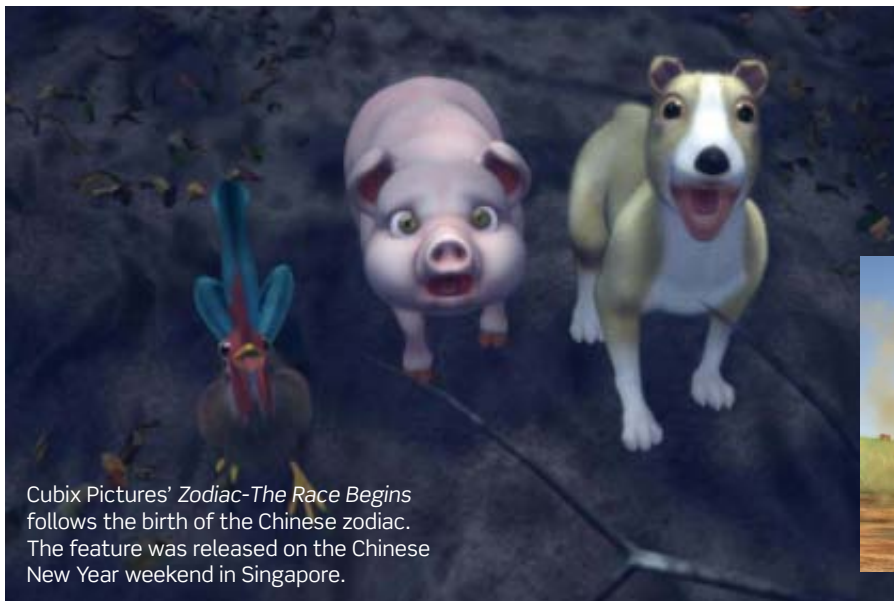


Benjamin Toh

Zodiac isn't alone. On the strength of the interest shown at Cannes, Cubix Pictures and Singapore's Media Development Authority entered into a five-picture deal worth \$18.4 million. The second picture, *Legend of the Sea*, based on a Chinese dragon fable, is already in production. Singapore's Economic Development Board has also entered into a ten-year, \$593 million commitment to expand Singapore as a center for digital animation in television series and games as well as feature films.

Some heavy hitters are already taking notice. George Lucas has opened LucasFilm Animation Singapore, a major CG production house and Lucas' first outside the U.S. It's expected to grow to a staff of 300, producing films, television series and computer games. Japanese game company Koei has also recently set up shop in Singapore, specifically to develop the online role-playing games *Nobunaga's Ambition* and *Uncharted Waters*. Koei has to live up to its own impressive catalogue of CG games. So does American gamemaker Electronic Arts, which also set up a Singapore studio, mainly to adapt its catalogue of titles to the Asian market.

Still, consumers will have the last word on the success, globally or locally, of Singapore animation. *Zodiac—The Race Begins* opened, appropriately, on the Chinese New Year weekend in Singapore, and, despite CEO Toh's prediction that "every Singaporean will leave the theater enlightened, entertained and proud," reviews were hardly unanimous. Angeline Chui of the Singa-



Cubix Pictures' *Zodiac—The Race Begins* follows the birth of the Chinese zodiac. The feature was released on the Chinese New Year weekend in Singapore.





pore site movieXclusive.com notes that the CG animation is good considering "that this is Singapore's maiden attempt at animation," but the story "is simply not risky or quirky enough" and "moments of endearing whimsy ... come few and far between."

There should be plenty of whimsy in the third Singapore animated feature, with a title that says it all: *Kung Fu Gecko*. The flagship film of Egg Story Creative Production, it's a tale of three misfits—a toad, a cricket and the title lizard—in an affectionate send-up of all of the now-familiar scenes and themes of Chinese martial arts films. Think of it as *Crouching Lizard, Hidden Dragonfly*.

Egg Story draws on more than a decade of experience by studio head Nickson Fong, who studied computer art at Savannah College of Art and Design, which he says back in 1991 was "the only place to learn computer art." Before returning to his native Singapore to found Egg Story, Fong worked on *Shrek* at DreamWorks SKG, *Starship Troopers* at Sony Pictures Imageworks, the *Matrix* sequels at ESC Entertainment and *The Scorpion King* at Centropolis Effects. At age 37, he's earned a global reputation in CG animation.

If you asked this self-described "geek" for the secret of CG animation success, he'd say that there isn't one. The medium is so new and multi-disciplinary that "there's no standard way of doing things." The key is to "know the basics well (before you) pick one area to focus on."

It's interesting to note that back in the day, Fong's focus was CG explosions. His *Kung Fu Gecko* may be the big bang that puts Singapore animation on the map. ■



A Chat with Gecko Master, Nickson Fong

Tell us how you came up with the idea behind *Kungfu Gecko*.

Nickson Fong: Growing up in Asia, I have always been fascinated by martial arts movies and ancient Chinese craftsmanship. This interest, coupled with my many years of work experience in Hollywood animation and visual effects, led to the creation of this film project. The story goes back a thousand years ago to Ancient China, capturing romance, adventure and humor in the worlds of the creatures and the humans. There is also an amazing integration of architectural structures into nature's landscapes. My hope is to use this rich background to unfold the adventures of these adorable animated characters. Our goal is to develop a clear and unique project, to distinguish ourselves from U.S. mainstream movie efforts. In short, we want to create wholesome family entertainment by blending eastern and western cultures using state of the art animation. In the end, we will breathe life into these characters. Regardless of whether they are insects, reptiles or animals, they will be characters that the audience will believe and remember.

When did you start working on the film?

Fong: We were working on multiple projects at the same time. So actual time spent on *Kungfu Gecko* would be around 12 months.

How are you securing the financing for the film?

Fong: The project is currently in pre-sale. We are presently in discussion with various distribution companies and are exploring different kinds of financing such as co-financing/co-production agreements, as well as possible film grants.

How many people are working on the project?

Fong: Presently, we have a production team of 50 people, and we are slowly expanding to meet our growing production requirements.

What kind of CG software do you use?

Fong: Alias Maya, mental ray, Shake and Maxon's Bodypaint.

What is your biggest challenge right now?



Nickson Fong

Fong: First, it is the need to find and train real talent to produce feature-film quality work. That's not easy because school doesn't teach you inspiration, creativity and the relevant skills sometimes.

Also, putting together a production pipeline in Asia

comes with multiple challenges, because although the sector is growing rapidly, there is still a lot that needs development. Third, I am embarking upon the project of setting up a renderfarm with Fujitsu primergy servers, and integrating all 3 OS Win/Mac/Linux in production. Running an animation studio also has its complexities, where I am overseeing all the nitty-gritty of the business, as well as the technical aspects of the production.

Q. What do you think about the animation climate in Singapore right now?

Fong: I am hoping to work more closely with local schools to train more CG artists and animators. Manpower can be an issue, because it's not easy to find real talents who are technically adept as well. Also, our company, Egg Story, is pioneering in an almost-unheard-of industry here. So we want to tell people if you have a dream, you have got to pursue it and just do it.

Who are some of your influences/animation heroes?

Fong: *Spider-Man*, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Akira Kurosawa, Pixar's *The Incredibles*, Sam Chong, Michelle Yeoh, Chow Yuen Fatt, Zhang Yi Mou, Quentin Tarantino—really too many to list!

When did you realize you wanted to be an animator?

Fong: Long time ago, I was always doodling stick figures in the Bible during Sunday school and, with all due respect, the Bible makes a pretty good flip-book.

Do you have any other projects in development right now?

Fong: There are several other projects being negotiated as we speak, but they are still in the early stages. However, we will keep our fans continuously updated on the progress of our developments. For these updates, you can check our website at <http://www.eggstorycp.com>. ■

FEATURE

By the Numbers

A few facts and figures from some of the major Asian animation markets:

THE PHILIPPINES



• Blooming Industry Estimates:

| Year | Workforce | Revenue (US'M) |
|------|-----------|----------------|
| 2004 | 2,800 | 52 |
| 2005 | 4,000 | 74 |
| 2006 | 6,000 | 111 |
| 2007 | 10,000 | 185 |
| 2008 | 17,000 | 315 |
| 2009 | 27,000 | 500 |
| 2010 | 41,000 | 759 |

*Source: The Philippines Board of Investments

FEATURE



JAPAN

- Approx. **430** anime production houses

Anime Market Size (Film, TV and Video)

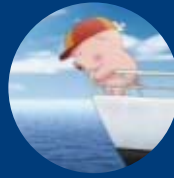
| | |
|-------------|-------------------|
| 2000 | 159.3 billion yen |
| 2001 | 186 billion yen |
| 2002 | 213.5 billion yen |
| 2003 | 191.2 billion yen |

*sales estimated to have grown in 2004 with the release of *Howl's Moving Castle*

- Around **60%** of the anime shown worldwide is made in Japan (according to a METI report issued in January 2004)
- A **30-minute** TV animation production generally costs around 10 million yen
- Many animators are reportedly earning annual incomes of **10 million yen**
- Japan's first anime vocational graduate school is scheduled to open in **April 2006**

*data from the Japan External Trade Organization's *Japan Economic Monthly*

CHINA



- **350,000 minutes**: Amount of animation broadcast across 47 channels with three dedicated cartoon channels.

CCTV (China Central Television) estimates:

Annual demand for original content: 79,000 minutes
Potential airtime: 1.8 million minutes

Total Investment in Animation for 2004: \$36.2 million, an average investment \$155 per minute

| | 2004 | 2005 | |
|--|------|------|-----------------|
| Number of series applying for production permission | 163 | 424 | = 260% increase |

- In 2005 over 90% of applications were greenlit and total approved national production reached **575,718 minutes**, that's **370%** increase from 2004

- Actual animation output for 2004 = **23,800 minutes**, only **15%** of approved animation was actually produced.

*According to *2006 China Media Yearbook and Directory* (published by China Media Monitor)

KOREA



Amount of money invested in animation: Approx. \$ 325 million

300: Estimated number of companies producing animation

| | TV | Film | Sell-Through |
|--------------------|----|------|--------------|
| New Product | 33 | 3 | 33 |

Annual Exports: \$76 million

* data for the 2003 Korean animation industry courtesy of KOCCA

— Compiled by Sarah Gurman

Adam Parrish
King

Brooklyn Blues

First-time animator Adam Parrish King impresses the Sundance crowd with his haunting stop-motion short, *The Wraith of Cobble Hill*. by Ramin Zahed

The Sundance Film Festival has a reputation for showcasing personal and quirky tales about bewildered underdogs who find themselves at odds with the world at large. So it wasn't a surprise to see Adam Parrish King's painstakingly claymated 15-minute short, *The Wraith of Cobble Hill* win the Jury Prize for Short Filmmaking at the fest.

Parrish King's black-and-white film centers on a neglected teen named Felix who faces a moral challenge when the owner of a neighborhood convenience store leaves him in charge of his shop and his dog. Not only does the animator bring a certain '50s-era neorealistic quality to his film, the character design will remind viewers of some of the darker Aardman shorts.

A graduate of USC's Film School, Parrish King shot the film on 16mm and constructed the characters from plasticine, latex, steel armatures and clay molds. He hand-constructed the sets and every item used by the characters (from ice cream and canned goods to whiskey bottles and comic books) in miniature. It took the animator more than five years to complete the project while he pursued his day job as a sound designer for

TV shows and film projects. He also worked on an interactive project at the Getty Museum in L.A.

"My background is in painting and sculpture," says Parrish King on the phone from his home in the hipster-cool Silverlake neighborhood of Los Angeles. "I just love the feeling of creating by myself, with good music on, in a small studio space. I really enjoy the process, the sculpting, the way light hits the textures and the fabrics, putting the things on the wall—all of it."

King says as a kid he was deeply affected by the Rankin/Bass classic *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. "As I grew older, I discovered the Brothers Quay in high school," he adds, "and I loved the way Aardman's *Creature Comforts* combined documentary audio with animation."

The script for *Cobble Hill* was completed

in the winter of 2000 and the voices were all recorded by the spring of 2001. However, it took the patient artist almost five years (and about \$10,000) to realize his vision. "I was still putting the finishing touches on the sound design a week before Sundance this year," says the animator. "I got the film to them just before the final deadline. The hardest part was creating the sets. Building the store alone took me five months."

Surprisingly, King is not a native of Brooklyn, himself. In fact, he grew up in the suburbs of Knoxville, Tennessee. However, he lived in New York for a number of years and that experience fueled his project. "I was always interested in the little glimpses you got of your neighbors—the sounds you heard through the floorboards, the passing images through windows of the apartment across the way. I wanted to structure the story on one of those moments. The world of Brooklyn always intrigued me. It's so full of history and ghosts. Like the main character in the short, I also had a bunch of friends who were mischievous when I was growing up."

It's always interesting to see what a new talent takes away from the Sundance experience. King says the whole festival thing was much better than he had expected. "I'm not into the business aspects of filmmaking, and I thought it was going to be a lot of slick producers, wheeling and dealing. But it was a lot more down to earth than I expected. By the end of it, it was all about being around a community of cinephiles, all appreciating each other's works. I fell in love with a lot of the other shorts—Brent Green's *Hadacol Christmas*, Bruce Alcock's *At the Qunite Hotel* and Anthony Lucas' *The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello*."

King says he's in the early planning stages for his next project. He won't divulge the details, but he gives us a clue. "Unlike *Cobble Hill*, which is all black and white and greys, my next film is going to have the vivid colors of life in the suburbs of Tennessee in the 1970s." Hmm, something tells us this one is going to be autobiographical! ■



Japanimation Hits Home

Our reporter catches up with some of the top anime DVD distributors in the U.S. to get their take on what's hot in 2006. by **Thomas J. McLean**

The first part of anime's journey to the global cultural force is complete. Having evolved out of the niche of small fan clubs and conventions to cable network staple and perennial DVD success, the industry is poised to face the next set of hurdles—many of which it shares with the larger entertainment industry.

Facing flattening DVD sales, the coming of high definition home video, new media and possible television overload, anime companies have a lot on their plate for 2006 and beyond.

Checking in with execs at top anime companies reveals that while they share many of the same concerns and see many challenges the same way, they also each have taken their own path to success and have their own points of view about what the future will bring.

ADV Films

Exec interviewed: John Ledford, president

What are your biggest sellers and why? *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. That's hardly surprising, since EVA is widely considered to be the greatest anime series of all time. More recently, our best selling series have been the action thrillers *Gantz* and *Elfen Lied* and the comedy series *Full Metal Panic?* *Fumoffu*.

Which of your titles do you think is most deserving of wider recognition and why? *Gilgamesh* is the first Goth-inflected anime series to come to the States,

and it has a cool, completely unique visual style that stands well apart from the norm for anime. Another is *Diamond Daydreams*, an anthology series following the stories of six young women in Hokkaido.

Greatest hits to date: Apart from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, ADV may be best known for *Robotech*. *Bubblegum Crisis 2040* is another signature title. *Spriggan* was a huge hit and *Lady Death*, which we produced ourselves and released in the fall of 2004, was a definite home run. *Chrono Crusade* was another all-time leader.

Hot titles to look for in 2006: We're very happy with our release of *Macross*, one of the three original Japanese series on which *Robotech* was based. We're presenting this classic to American audiences for the first time with an English dub.



John Ledford



Thoughts on anime's global popularity: It's generally understood that Japan has become a net cultural exporter, rivaling the U.S. in its reach and influence. Anime is only one conspicuous example.

Biggest Challenges in 2006: Media fragmentation, new technologies, the "on-demand" revolution. However you choose to frame it, we face the same challenges as any content provider in the digital age.

Favorite anime hero/heroine: Sosuke, the hero of *Full Metal Panic*, because he never loses sight of his mission.

Best use of anime in mainstream pop culture: The original *Matrix* incorporated many elements of what's made anime popular and did it flawlessly, which is no mean feat for a live-action movie.

How has TV exposure on outlets like Cartoon Network and [adult swim] helped the anime business in America?

Now that more outlets are carrying anime, and the consumer no longer has to work so hard to find it, that's brought us a whole new kind of fan. In fact, I don't think it's a stretch to say that anime has become mainstream and there's an incredible unmet demand for anime on TV.

Central Park Media

Exec interviewed: John O'Donnell, managing director

What are your biggest sellers and why? For 2005: *Grave of the Fireflies*, because it is one of the finest animated films ever produced; *Yu Yu Hakusho: The Movie* — *Poltergeist Report*,

because of the incredible success of the *Yu Yu Hakusho* television series; *Kakurenbo*, because of its unique and original graphic style.

Which of your titles do you think is most deserving of wider recognition and why? *Doggy Poo* has received dozens of awards from film festivals, children's programming groups, and incredible reviews. No one who has seen it has failed to be moved by the heartwarming story.



Grave of the Fireflies

Yu Yu Hakusho: Poltergeist Report



so that they can save Lodoss Island.

Best use of anime in mainstream pop culture: *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* and *The Animatrix*.

How has TV exposure helped the anime biz in America?

It has given the genre credibility, and raised the profile of anime to the point where mass merchants are willing to carry the products.

GENEON Entertainment

Exec interviewed:

Jason Alnas, marketing manager

What are your biggest

sellers and why? *Appleseed* was our No. 1 title for 2005 mostly due to its theatrical release. *Samurai Champloo's* run on Cartoon Network led to its success, along with its soundtrack and visual mix of Japanese tradition and modern hip-hop that appeals to the current teen audience. *Trigun* is a mainstay in anime and has held its own for close to five years due to the incredible story and its ability to appeal to core and non-core consumers alike.

Which of your titles do you think is

most deserving of wider recognition and why? *Fighting Spirit*. I am no boxing fan but it's such a great title that appeals to the part inside all of us that wants to succeed and be the best.

What are your greatest hits to date? *Samurai Champloo*, *Tenjo Tenge*, *Trigun*, *Appleseed* and *Hellsing*.

What are the hot titles to look for in 2006? *Viewtiful Joe*, *Elemental Gelade*, *Law of Ueki*, *Hellsing Ultimate Series* and *GunXSword*.

Thoughts on the anime's global popularity: The reason that anime has such a global appeal is that it targets a broad spectrum of people and is not constrained by the notion that animated features or cartoons are for kids.

Biggest challenges in 2006: One of our biggest challenges is to find new ways to reach out to potential consumers.

Favorite anime hero/heroine: Vash the Stampede from *Trigun*. He's a man who tries his best to leave his past behind him by changing his motto to "Love and Peace" and living his life as carefree as possible. But in the end, he has to come to grips with who he was and stop running away from his past in order to save his friends and himself.

What do you think is the best use of anime in mainstream pop culture?

The best use of anime to date was *Robotech*! How many of us watched that on TV and had no idea it was from Japan?

How has TV exposure helped the anime business in America? Cartoon Network has done wonders for anime in America. Once people sit down and watch anime they realize how good it is.

I don't know how many parents I have talked to when I attend anime conventions who tell me that they themselves got hooked on anime because their kids were watching it on TV.

Manga Entertainment

Exec interviewed:

Kaoru Mfaume, managing director



John O'Donnell

Greatest Hits to date: *Record of Lodoss War*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, *Project A-ko*, *Dominion Tank Police*, *M.D. Geist*.

Hot titles to look for in 2006: *Animation Runner*

Kuromi 2 was the big winner at the Tokyo International Anime Fair last year. *Munto 2*, the first OVA was so well received, that the fans in Japan prepaid for the DVD of the sequel a year ahead of street date, to allow the production company to produce it! *Negadon: The Monster From Mars*, a tour-de-force CGI homage to Japan's "man in rubber suit" monster movies of the '50s and '60s.

Thoughts on the anime's global popularity: After decades of American culture sweeping the globe, the time has come for non-American cultures (Japan, Korean, etc.) to claim their share of world attention. As the world becomes more connected via the Internet, this sharing of local cultures will only increase.

Biggest Challenges in 2006: Getting ready for the launch of High Definition DVD formats.

Favorite anime hero/heroine: Parn in *Record of Lodoss War*. As the leader of a ragtag group of warriors, he must unite the group



Hellsing



Appleseed



Tenjo Tenge

What are your biggest sellers and why? Titles like *Ghost in the Shell*, *Ninja Scroll*, *Blood*, the *Evangelion* movies, *X* and *Akira* (in Europe) sell very well as they represent the best of theatrical Japanese animation, besides the Miyazaki films.

Which of your titles do you think is most deserving of wider recognition and why? *Dead Leaves*, for its amazing animation production and fresh outlook on Japanese anime; and *Kaidohmaru* for its artistic style of portraying the Heian era beautifully with its pastille look.

Hot titles to look for in 2006: *Karas* will be our strongest title for the year, but as *Naruto* will be released by Manga in the U.K., I feel excited about this as well.

Thoughts on the anime's global popularity: Anime's popularity is growing annually but I feel that some anime distributors are playing to the same crowd

too often. Manga will try to broaden the its fan base by releasing high-quality animation that appeals to not only the anime fans, but also mainstream audiences.



Kaoru Mfaume



Ninja Scrolls



Ghost in the Shell

Biggest Challenges in 2006: We haven't been as proactive with our fans and I feel that it's time to revisit and restructure this particular area. Another challenge that we all face in this industry is the fact that DVD sales are slowing and new media is an area that Manga will be actively involved in.

Favorite anime hero/heroine: Kinnikuman, because of the "meat" on his forehead!

Best use of anime in mainstream pop culture: *South Park*, episode 801 ("Good Times With Weapons") is hysterical.

How has TV exposure helped the anime business in America? It has helped it considerably but I think there will be a limit to how much anime can be aired in the U.S. because anime isn't the only option out there for the broadcasters.

VIZ Media

Exec interviewed: Anthony Jiwa, director of marketing

What are your biggest sellers and why? *InuYasha*. Rumiko Takahashi's storytelling style and compelling characters are big reasons for the success of the series. Fans also respond to the fantastic animation style.

Which of your titles do you think is most deserving of wider recognition and why? *Saikano* merits more recognition. The animation is beautiful, the characters are gripping and the dramatic storyline and political message make this an epic series.

Greatest Hits to date: The *InuYasha* movies have been our biggest hits to date. These have all sold over a quarter of a million copies each. Some of our *Pokémon* titles also sold exceptionally well.

Hot titles to look for in 2006: Based on the success of the first three *InuYasha* movies, we have very high expectations for *InuYasha*



InuYasha

— *The Movie 4: Fire on the Mystic Island*, that will be released on DVD in August 2006. *Naruto* is also a new title that will definitely be hot in 2006. We will be launching the first DVD volume in March, as part of the *Shonen Jump Home Video* line. The first uncut box set is slated for July. Finally, we will be launching the first *Shojo Beat Home Video* titles this year.



Anthony Jiwa

Favorite anime hero/heroine: Kakashi from *Naruto*: He's a top-notch ninja, but he is also enigmatic and mysterious. Sango from *InuYasha*—not only does she wield a massive boomerang, she also has Kirara, a flying fire-cat creature.

Best use of anime in mainstream pop culture: In Japan anime is mainstream pop culture! Even in North America, titles such as *Pokémon*, *InuYasha*, *Dragon Ball Z* and Miyazaki movies such as *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away* have demonstrated that anime is not purely a niche market

How has TV exposure helped the anime business in America? Cartoon Network has been very supportive of anime, programming shows such as *InuYasha*, *Naruto* and *Zatch Bell!* has greatly helped all of these properties find broader audiences here. This increased exposure has developed a fan base that has grown to seek out new anime series. ■

Thomas J. McLean is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in animation, visual effects and comic-books.

ROCK ON

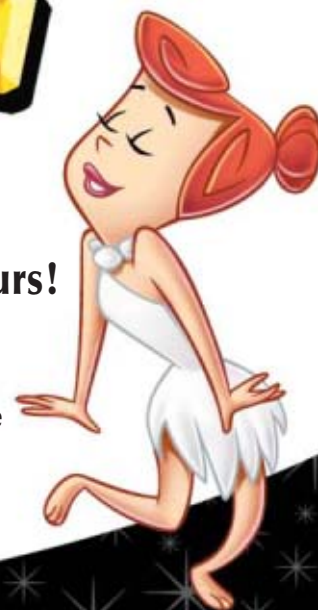
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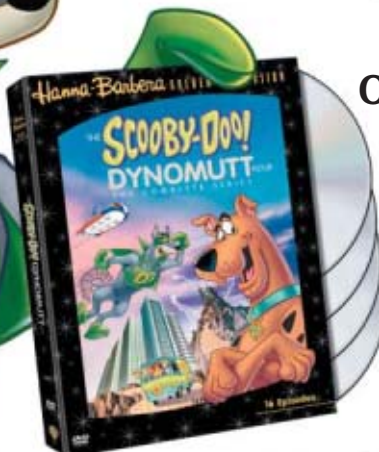


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The Samurai Critic:

Reviews of this month's hot new anime titles on DVD



Illustration by Dan Hoffstedt

by Charles Solomon

Howl's Moving Castle; My Neighbor Totoro; Whisper of the Heart (Walt Disney Home Video: \$29.99 each; 2-disc sets)

This month, three outstanding DVD releases (on Disney Home Video) remind viewers why Studio Ghibli has become synonymous with the best in contemporary animation: they each offer warmly human characters, gloriously animated visuals, skillful filmmaking and masterful storytelling.

Whisper of the Heart (1995), the least well-known of the three, is a coming-of-age story that began as a manga by Aoi Hiiragi. Hayao Miyazaki wrote the script and story-boarded the film, then turned it over to Yoshifumi Kondo. Kondo was clearly an artist of great promise whom Miyazaki was grooming as a director; sadly, he died shortly after completing this gentle film.

Junior high student Shizuku Tsukishima is a voracious reader and a loyal friend, but she lacks focus. When she meets a delightfully snooty cat on a commuter train, she follows him to an antique store in the Tama Hills area of Tokyo (the setting for *Pom Poko*). Seiji Amasawa, the kindly proprietor's grandson, is a student at her school who wants to be a violinmaker. Seeing Seiji's determination to fulfill his dream galvanizes Shizuku: she realizes she wants to become a writer. A mysterious statue of a cat in the antique shop inspires her first story.

Like Kiki in *Kiki's Delivery Service*, Shizuku is a richly realized adolescent. Her first meeting with Seiji feels awkward and she marches home repeating "stupid jerk" under her breath like a mantra. As their unstated affection grows, Shizuku wonders if she's good enough for him, only to discover he's wrestling with similar doubts. As the voices of Shizuku and Seiji in the film's first English dub, Brittany Snow and David Gallagher offer warm, believable performances.

For years, Miyazaki's acclaimed 1988 fea-



My Neighbor Totoro

Howl's Moving Castle

Whisper of the Heart

ture, *My Neighbor Totoro*, was only available in a pan-and-scan transfer with an unremarkable English dub. Parts of the story are based on Miyazaki's own childhood. While their mother is in the hospital, 10-year-old Satsuki and four-year-old Mei move with their professor father to a rickety old farmhouse in the Saitama Prefecture, which was an undeveloped agricultural area in the '50s, when the film is set. Miyazaki did much of his growing up in Saitama when his mother was hospitalized.

The story of *Totoro* is familiar to viewers around the world: Mei and Satsuki befriend the King Totoro, a benevolent forest spirit, who watches over the sisters and takes them on magical adventures. Dakota Fanning and Elle Fanning capture the love and excitement Satsuki and Mei share; as their gentle father, Tim Daly sounds appropriately patient and understated. *My Neighbor Totoro* may be the most charming animated feature ever made, and that charm is more apparent than ever in this new letter-boxed edition.

Last year, *Howl's Moving Castle* passed *Princess Mononoke* to become the number three box-office champion in Japanese history, behind *Spirited Away* and James Cameron's *Titanic*. Nineteen-year-old Sophie has decided she's too plain to do more than work in her family's hat shop. Her shy charm attracts the dashing Howl, an immature wizard, which causes the Witch of the Waste to transform

Sophie into a go-year-old woman. In her aged guise, Sophie discovers her hidden potential. Once inside Howl's castle, a ramshackle structure that looks like it's about to fall apart, Sophie's straightforward determination wins the affection and respect of Howl's young apprentice Markl; the fussy fire demon Calcifer; and Heen, a wheezing dog. She also wins Howl's love, and ends a destructive war.

The work of the Studio Ghibli animators has grown increasingly polished, and they infuse the voiceless characters with clear personalities. The mute scarecrow in *Howl* can only hop and spin, yet the viewer understands what's going on inside his turnip-head. The artists milk every drop of physical comedy from the scenes of Sophie lugging the obviously heavy Heen up a seemingly endless staircase.

All three films overflow with eclipsing visuals that range from panoramas of skies and mountains to intimate views of the natural world. When Satsuki and Mei wait in the forest to bring their father an umbrella, the shots of a frog in a puddle and droplets falling from pine needles vividly convey the sensation of being caught in a rainstorm. But what really sets these features apart is the depth of observation and honesty of portrayal that makes the characters come alive—and show just how superficial the wisecracking nonentities in many recent American features have been. ■

Spring DVD Fever

Parodies, Looney progeny and Pooh take the edge off residual winter chill. **by Sarah Gurman**

Robot Chicken, Vol. 1
[Turner Home Entertainment,
\$29.98]

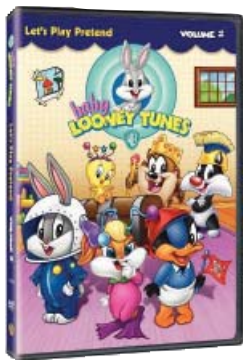
The brainchild of Seth Green and Matt Senreich, *Robot Chicken*'s ADD relishing stop-motion satire is one of the treasured jewels in the animated crown of [adult swim]'s latenight offerings. Inspired from the "Twisted Toyfare Theater" feature that appeared regularly in *Toyfare* magazine (Senreich was former editor of the magazine), the show features action figures taking center stage in pop culture parodies. *Robot Chicken* (named after a dish served at a local Chinese restaurant) has attracted a high-caliber collection of celeb guests to lend their voices to the toy melodramas, including the entire cast of *That '70s Show*, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Burt Reynolds and Rachel Leigh Cook in a knockout take on what really happens after the camera stops rolling on those anti-drug PSAs. Fans will be happy to know that the two-disc set comes stocked with 20 episodes and eclectic bonus features like scene comparisons showing the contrasts between the FX/Wire to animation



stage and the animatic to episode stage, audio commentary on each episode from the creators, deleted scenes and a pee gag reel—all your favorite characters, all peeing their pants. Come on, you can't call yourself cul-

tured if you haven't seen Michael Jackson Classic duke it out with Michael Jackson Modern!

Baby Looney Tunes, Vol. 1 and 2
[Warner Home Video,
\$14.98 each]



H m m m m , while you're watching *Robot Chicken* you might want to pop in one of these *Baby Looney Tunes* collections for the kiddies. (The

pee gag reel's humor could prove elusive for some.) And if you've ever wondered what Bugs was like before he reached full-blown rabbit maturity, you might consider cuddling up with directors Michael Hack and Jeffrey Gatrall's tot-sized Looney Tunes. Each of these discs holds 48 minutes of Warner Bros.' original irreverent toons in toddler form living together in Granny's big house and discovering the nuances of the world. Targeted at the preschool audience, *Baby Looney Tunes* allows the little ones to learn life lessons about everything from fibbing, to school, to leaving the precious blankie behind, in the company of junior pranksters like Baby Daffy, Sylvester and Tweety (and you thought he couldn't get any cuter). A seasoned crew of vocal talents like Ian James Corlett, Bailey Devlin, June Foray, Janyse Jaud, Mariko Kage and Ellen Kennedy provide voices for the loony babies. Over the years Warner Bros. has explored various generations

and life stages for Bugs and co. Now as the baby boomers get ready for retirement, don't be surprised if the studio greenlights a *Senior Folks Home Loony Toons* one of these days.

Pooh's Grand Adventure: The Search for Christopher Robin
[Walt Disney Video, \$29.99]

Directed by Karl Geurs, this 1997 direct-to-video feature is a little darker than your typical Pooh fare, revealing a more mysterious side to the famous 100-Acre Wood. Picking up where Disney's 1977 classic *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* left off, *Pooh's Grand Adventure* finds Christopher Robin ready to start school. However, he doesn't know how to tell his Pooh that they will be separated, so writes him a note instead. Pooh and the gang end up misunderstanding the note and believe that the boy has been kidnapped. Before long, A.A. Milne's popular honey-lover pulls together a rescue party with the help of Rabbit, Tigger and Piglet, and they're off to Skull to find their friend. Though it doesn't match its predecessor, this Pooh movie is no slouch,



thanks in part to Disney recruiting the original voices of Piglet and Tigger, John Fiedler and Paul Winchell (both of whom passed away last year), as well as the incomparable Jim Cummings delivering a lovely take on Pooh's gentle rasp. And there's also some honey at the bottom of the pot for the DVD buyer: The release includes the original Academy Award-winning short *Pooh's Blustery Day*, the Adventures in 100-Acre Wood game and the "Pooh's Symphony" feature for the melody-minded folks. ■



A KOCCA Star is Born

by Sarah Gurman

KOCCA (Korea Culture and Content Agency) has another Star Project Award success story on its hands. Barunson and G&G Entertainment, producers of the 2002 Star Project Award winner *MaskMan*, have just sold their action-packed animated property to KBS (Korea Broadcasting Service) for broadcast, and Taiwan's Mighty Media has picked up broadcast and licensing rights on the show as well.

The *MaskMan* series, which mixes traditional and CG technologies, first caught Mighty Media's eye at MIPCOM 2005 where the company shared the KOCCA stand with Barunson and G&G Entertainment. Securing the licensing and broadcast rights on the property was not a typical move for Mighty Media. Barunson's general manager Harry Yoon explains, "*MaskMan* was instantly appealing to several companies in Taiwan, which competed for the broadcast and licensing rights. Interestingly, Mighty Media—which usu-



ally imports and distributes Japanese animation—stepped up and made the strongest offer."

It's not hard to see why Mighty Media was drawn to Barunson and G&G Entertainment's wrestling-filled comedy creation. *MaskMan*'s playful ani-

mation delivers the super-powered adventures of a courageous band of fighters from the Mask Planet. This rough and tumble crew has joined forces to foil the evil plans of Darkman and his minions.

KOCCA selected *MaskMan* out of a large pool of candidates in 2002 based on its originality, quality, marketability and its potential to increase the worldwide presence of Korean content. Serving to develop and promote Kore-

an content industries globally, KOCCA honors Korean properties with the Star Project Award each year to bolster shows with global promise. "We had tremendous confidence in *MaskMan* when we recognized the property with our Star Project Award," notes VP of KOCCA Sang Gill Lee, "and we are especially pleased by the significant strides made by the producers with *MaskMan* since accepting the award."

After *MaskMan* earned the KOCCA honor in 2002, the Seoul-based character development specialists at Barunson and G&G Entertainment produced 39 half-hour episodes of the show and built a substantial licensing program geared toward global expansion for their brand.

Now, on the heels of clinching successful licensing and broadcast agreements for *MaskMan* in Korea and Taiwan, Barunson and G&G Entertainment are planning to bring the property to Southeastern Asia with their sights set on Hong Kong, Indonesia and Malaysia. The producers are also trying to introduce *MaskMan* in France, Spain, Austria and the U.S. ■

For more information visit:
www.maskman.co.kr



Larry Schwarz

A Sushi Out of Water

An American actor makes it big as an anime hero in the Animation Collective/Nicktoon series, *Kappa Mikey*. by Ramin Zahed

New York-based Animation Collective CEO and founder Larry Schwarz knows a few things about creating quality kids' toys and entertainment. After all, Schwarz was the man behind the children's multimedia operation Rumpus (Remember rumpus.com and Zeeks.com?) and award-winning toys such as *Monster in My Closet* and *Harry Hairball*. (We should also mention that he's a former child actor and a stand-up comic as well!)

These days, Schwarz is overseeing so many toons that it's getting impossible to keep them all straight. Not only is he the creator and exec producer of *Thumb Wrestling Federation*, *Leader Dog* and *Tortellini Western* for Nicktoons and *Ellen's Acres*, *HTDT* and *Princess Natasha* for Cartoon Network, he's also the man in charge of most of the content seen on KOL and RED (America Online's Kids and Teen channels), including *SKWOD*, *Kung Fu Academy* and *Gene the Boy Genie*.

On February 25, his latest brainchild, *Kappa Mikey* made a big splash on Nicktoons Network. With a catchy theme song by the popular Japanese band, Beat Crusaders, and sporting a visual look that's a clever pastiche of anime and western tra-

ditions, the show has the distinction of being Nickelodeon's first global acquisition. Beginning in May, the 26x30 min. series will roll out across Nick's international channels in Asia and Europe. It's also one of those cultural bellwethers that points to the huge impact of Japanese animation on the global pop culture in the past few decades.

"We took the two popular styles of animation and combined them in a new setting," says Schwarz. "We then added all kinds of silly and goofy stuff that the kids could relate to and added numerous anime references and pop culture asides that adults can enjoy as well. Nick gave us the freedom to make the show we wanted to make."

The cable company is promoting *Kappa Mikey* as the "only anime television series



created and produced in the U.S." Although that statement is open to debate, the premise of the show is quite original: It's based on a struggling American actor Mikey Simon, who finds himself in hot demand when he joins the cast of a once-popular anime show in Japan. For a variety of reasons, Mikey is soon able to restore the *LilyMu* show to its former glory, but, as a result, he also has to learn to adapt to Japanese culture and deal with the downside of fame.

"*Kappa Mikey* is the kind of show that supports our mandate to deliver our global audience the best compelling entertainment available," says Keith Dawkins, Nicktoons' VP and general manager. "It's also a very quirky and great looking show, and we know that kids and adult fans of anime are going to love the kind of fun it has with the conventions of the genre."

Like many other Animation Collective projects, *Kappa Mikey* is created using Flash technology. However, the studio also employs After Effects and Maya to flesh out the CG backgrounds and vehicles. "We don't really have a studio style, visually," Schwarz points out. "What unites us at the studio is a certain comic sense. We're trying hard to invest in our staff and build up on our team so that we can keep the same creative team on different shows."

Of course, Schwarz's ties with AOL has also positioned him well to explore new ventures in the multi-platform universe. "It's a wonderful opportunity to create content that works differently on various platforms," he notes. "There are different ways to take advantage of each specific medium and that gives you the ability to offer new material for cell phones, web toons or Google videos. Of course, we're an independent company, so we're excited to see how eventually we can monetize these different platforms. You have to remember that we are a New York indie shop and don't have government subsidies for animation like they do in France or Canada." Or Japan, for that matter! ■

***Kappa Mikey* airs on Nicktoons Saturdays at 8 p.m., as part of the network's Three-Headed Monster programming block.**



When Classroom Pets Dig Show Tunes

Three musically minded animals are the stars of Nick Jr.'s inventive new show, *The Wonder Pets!* by **Ramin Zahed**

It's a rare show that can appeal to bright-eyed preschoolers, show tune fanatics, animation aficionados and lovers of soft and fuzzy animals all at the same time. We're happy to report that Josh Selig's (*Little Bill*, *Oobi*) brilliant new series *The Wonder Pets!* accomplishes that great task and more. The inventive new offering, which debuted on both Nick Jr. and sister outlet Noggin on Friday, March 3, is bound to attract a diverse group of fans on the strength of its visual panache and its contagious music.

Centering on three delightful classroom pets (Linny the Guinea Pig, Turtle Tuck and Ming-Ming Duckling) which come to the rescue of baby animals in distress, the 20x30-minute show is also billed as a mini-operetta, because it showcases music written and developed by some of Broad-



Josh Selig

way's top composers. The project's music producer/supervisor is Grammy-winner Jeffrey Lesser, who has worked with the likes of Barbra Streisand, Lou Reed, Joni Mitchell and Linda Ronstadt. Tony-winning composers Robert Lopez (*Avenue Q*), Andrew Lippa (*You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*), Jason Robert Brown (*Parade*) and Michael John LaChiusa (*The Wild Party*) are among the top-notch talent deliver-

ing music for the pets.

"The show's origins go back to a series of interstitials featuring Linny the Guinea Pig that our animation director Jennifer Oxley created for Nick Jr.," says Selig, the founder of New York-based studio Little Airplane. "The shorts, which were set to music by Tchaikovsky, did really well, so when Nick approached me to do a preschool show with superheroes, we decided to make Linny one of the Wonder Pets!"

Selig says he was fortunate to have Lesser on board as music producer. "We have some of the heavy-hitters on the Broadway scene because Jeffrey was very well-connected."

The show's animation is created in-house by the 55-person team at Little Airplane studio, and as Selig points out, it certainly has a unique visual quality. "We wanted the pets to look like real animals, but I didn't know how to execute that, so I brought these 2D pictures and showed them to Jennifer."

"We call the technique Photo Puppetry," explains Oxley. "It involves taking photographs of the real animals, and manipulating them, doing head and arm and body rotations using [Adobe] Photoshop to create these movable puppets. Our style is different from simple cut-out animation. We want the pets to look like real animals and to incorporate more fluid soft movements."

Also helping the team with the storylines is research director Dr. Laura Brown, who makes sure the show offers preschoolers lessons on teamwork and problem-solving. In the premiere episode, for example, the Wonder Pets travel to Hawaii to rescue a young dolphin caught in a fisherman's net. They also adopt their flyboat for space travel to save a baby chimp lost in space and journey to the South Pole to give a lending paw to a baby penguin stranded on an iceberg.

"I'm especially happy with the love and care that we put in the creation of each episode of the show," says the 41-year-old Selig, who actually starred on *Sesame Street* when he was a young boy and has won 11 Emmys for his writing on that influential PBS show. "I'm really proud of the fact that we do the series here in New York City so that we can draw upon the wonderful animators and musicians the city has to offer. They really pour their heart and soul in every episode."

Although the show is made specifically with the preschool audience in mind, Selig and Oxley say they'll be thrilled to see their brainchild develop a cult following (a la the *Teletubbies*). As Selig notes, "We love making preschool shows, but we'd also like to entertain everyone who happens to meet the pets." ■

***The Wonder Pets!* airs on Nick Jr. weekdays at 11:30 a.m.**

The Padded Cel

There's Still No Dirge for the Urge to Merge

It Continues to Surge (On A Rhyming Dictionary I Did Splurge)



by Robby London

To cite the most profound and intelligent quote ever associated with former President Ronald Reagan: "Now there you go again!" I direct this sentiment to the perpetrators of the three latest blockbuster merger-acquisitions: UPN and The WB; Paramount/DreamWorks; and Disney/Pixar.

I can't remember exactly when all this merger fever started, but I actually do remember a time when, if you went to work for a media or production company, chances were—if you weren't caught stealing office supplies or photocopying your own butt (that was what it was called in those days)—you might actually be able to remain at this same company for quite some time. And if you were caught—you had a real shot at becoming CEO!

In reflecting on this bygone, merger-free era of workplace stability (technically known as "The Neolithic Age") it seemed as though entertainment companies actually focused the bulk of their attention on ... entertainment: Characters, storytelling and showmanship. Actually, it's probably a good thing the latter doesn't exist today since if it did, it would have to be called "showpersonship." Which almost makes "synergistic" sound good.

In any case, does it ever strike you that for a long, long time now, so much energy seems to be devoted to corporate restructuring, merging and the resultant wondering and worrying? Wondering if you still have a job. Wondering if you still have a boss. Worrying that they'll change the locks on the supply closet and the photocopier.

And of course, with most every merg-

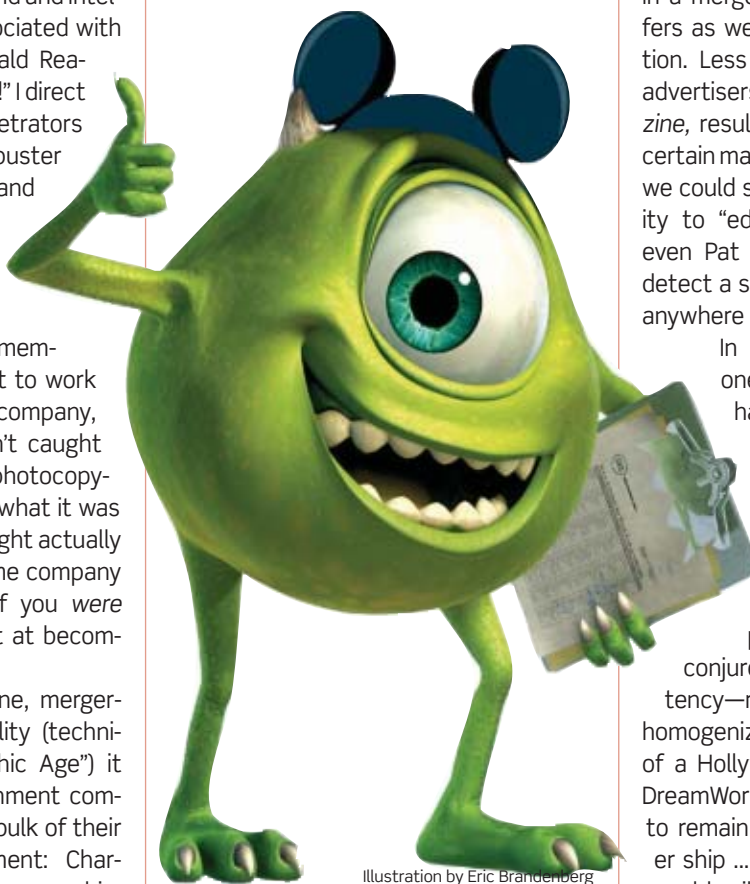


Illustration by Eric Brandenburg

er/acquisition, the pet projects of the vanquished become the kitty litter of the conqueror. The "de rigueur" announcement reassuring employees that there will be "absolutely no layoffs" is followed within days by the executive who made this announcement being laid off. So begins a virtual tsunami of unemployment. (In case you're wondering, such a reassessment of corporate policy is legally permissible according to a highly technical statutory loophole in employee law known as the "CEO Fingers-Crossed Exemption.")

It's not just employees who are at risk

in a merger/acquisition. The public suffers as well. Less choice. Less competition. Less diversity of product. Fewer advertisers available to *Animation Magazine*, resulting in the discontinuation of certain marginal monthly columns. I think we could safely credit such an eventuality to "editorial Darwinism"—since not even Pat Robertson has been able to detect a single sign of intelligent design anywhere in the vicinity of this page.

In thinking about Disney/Pixar, one worries that the canary may have swallowed the cat...while Dr. Heimlich is on the golf course. One can only hope that John Lasseter and all the wonderful talents at Pixar can maintain their creative compass and perpetuate the magic they have conjured with such unerring consistency—rather than see it vitiated and homogenized by the entrenched culture of a Hollywood conglomerate. At least DreamWorks Animation has managed to remain independent from the mother ship ... for now. And, to be fair, the world will not exactly clamor for the return of shows like *Cuts*, *Eve* or *Britney & Kevin: Chaotic* from the must-flee-TV schedule of UPN. But still, the seemingly endlessssssssss consolidation of the media business remains very troubling. I'm running a little low on office supplies...

On an unrelated note: special thanks to the many hundreds of readers who wrote in urging me to do a column poking a little good-natured fun at the Prophet Mohammed. And the one reader who simply suggested I go play in traffic. ■

Robbie London is an animation industry veteran who has seen his share of mergers.

TELEVISION

Crossing Borders

Korean character and animation properties are gaining visibility outside their homeland. **by Karen Raugust**

Retail sales of licensed goods in Korea have been growing at a rate of 10% per year since 2000, according to KOCCA, the division of the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism that is charged with fostering growth in the creative content industry. Yet even with these robust increases—which occurred during a slow period for the economy as a whole—Korean licensors are looking outside their home territory for future growth.

"The Korean domestic market has a limit in its size," says Sang-Gil Lee, executive VP of KOCCA, which promotes Korean companies involved in animation, character licensing, music, games and mobile and Internet content. "Korean licensors, animation producers, character developers and other creative content providers have no way but to expand toward the global market." At Licensing Int'l 2005, the trade show held in New York last June, 21 Korean firms showed their properties to retailers and manufacturers from around the world, in an exhibit coordinated by KOCCA.

Meanwhile, as Korean companies turn their focus abroad, there has been increased demand for Korean proper-

Vancouver-based Studio B is producing a show based on Vooz's Pucca character.

ties in Europe, Latin America, North America and elsewhere over the last several years. This is largely due to the continued worldwide popularity of Asian properties in general, particularly Japanese anime and manga.

Pucca Leads the Way

One of the first Korean characters to become established overseas was *Pucca*, licensed by Vooz. It appears on a variety of women's and girls' products in 72 countries across Asia and Europe, and is being developed into an animated series. Vooz and another Korean company, Gravity Corp., best known for the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Ragnarok*, recently entered into a strategic partnership to create a *Pucca* online game for global distribution.

The success of *Pucca* in Europe and elsewhere has set the stage for other Korean properties to do business abroad. Examples include Barunson with *MaskMan*, Ocon with *Dibo the Gift Dragon*, Iconix with *Pororo the Little Penguin*, Sunwoo Entertainment with *Mixmaster*, Rainbus with *Alexander the Great*, Character Korea with *Jongno 7*, and Characterline with *Ddung*, *Ayap* and *Chichi*.

Characterline introduced *Ddung* to global markets at MIPCOM 2005, and has done a deal with QQ.com, a 180-

million-member Internet portal in China, for online games, news, mobile character downloads, avatars, wallpapers and other interactive content. Characterline is developing a series of 18 Flash-animated episodes and plans to license *Ddung* in Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, Characterline and several other Korean companies are following *Pucca* into the European market. Characterline has been targeting European territories actively, participating in trade fairs such as MIPCOM, the Frankfurt Book Fair and Brand Licensing London. Last year, it signed a deal with Portuguese licensing agent TBZ, which brought its characters into Europe for the first time. (*Ayap* and *Chichi* are also licensed in Brazil and the Philippines.)

Character Korea's *Jongno 7* has moved into the European market through a licensing agency, The Li-

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censing Factory. The *Jongno 7* animated series airs on the Korean Broadcasting System domestically, and had already expanded into Taiwan before entering Europe.

A character-driven apparel line from Sieun Design called *Western Macaroni* is doing business in Europe through a licensing agreement with Dutch manufacturer Bremtex, which distributes its products throughout Europe and is also the European clothing licensee for *Pucca*. Sieun is developing a *Western Macaroni* animated series; in Korea, several products aside from the clothing line, including toys, are on the market.

Licensing at Home

According to KOCCA's 2005 *Character Industry Report*, retail sales of licensed goods in Korea reached 258.8 billion won (about \$267 million) in 2004. Homegrown Korean characters accounted for over 40% of the domestic market that year.

The country's top character in the early 2000s, KOCCA says, was *Mashimaro*, a cute, mute rabbit created in 1990 and licensed by CLKO Entertainment in conjunction with agency ePhoenix Networks. In 2003 and 2004, the top property was *Little Dinosaur Dooly*, which was created in 1983 and has about 1,200 licensed items on the market from 70 companies. In 2005, *Pucca* was the top character property in Korea, while Sunwoo's *Mixmaster* was the number-one property from the realm of animation.

A key licensing trend in Korea, as elsewhere in the world, is that properties are increasingly developed with more than one media sector (licensing, animation, online, mobile, etc.) in mind. "The line between the genres is getting unclear," Lee explains, noting that KOCCA calls this strategy "One Source Multi Use," or OSMU. Sunwoo's *Mixmaster*, for example, was developed simultaneously as animation, an offline



trading card game with an online version, and as a property appearing on a range of licensed products.

No matter where they originate, look for more Korean properties to cross geographic borders as consumers around the world continue to demand Asian character merchandise and entertainment, and as more Korean licensors attempt to meet that demand by working with manufacturers and broadcasters around the world. ■

Karen Raugust is the author of *The Licensing Business Handbook*.



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V for Visual Vigilance

Dan Glass and his team of vfx artists use CG technology wisely and sparingly in the big-screen adaptation of Alan Moore's graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*. by Ron Magid

The Wachowski siblings are back—sort of. *The Matrix* architects have returned as screenwriters and second unit directors on *V for Vendetta*—helmed by *The Matrix* alum James McTeigue. The film is adapted from David Lloyd and Alan Moore's graphic novel about a mysterious, masked, swashbuckling vigilante known only as "V" (Hugo Weaving), who uses terrorist tactics against the fascist state of "Greater" Britain after Germany has won a future World War. When V saves Evey (Natalie Portman) from torture, she joins his quest to bring freedom and justice back to a society fraught with cruelty and corruption.

The fact that the story mirrors aspects of America circa 2006 was not lost on the filmmakers and visual ef-

fects supervisor Dan Glass (*The Matrix Revolutions*, *Batman Begins*). "It's very political in a way, and poignant," Glass observes, "and I think it's very important that it comes out now."

Interestingly, *V for Vendetta* was shot in Berlin, that hotbed of WW II fascism, which undoubtedly colored the filmmakers' experience. The project attracted other *The Matrix* contributors, including production designer Owen Paterson, and that shared history made working with the enigmatic Wachowskis easier. "It was like a reunion on the other side of the world," Glass says. "You don't have to learn each other's strange and subtle gestures, especially the Wachowskis, who're not phenomenally expressive. They were around almost the whole time, ended up directing most of the

second unit big action bits and left James to the dialogue and acting. We were all wondering how it would work out, but it worked out very well. As the Wachowskis are great action directors, in a lot of ways it was sensible for James to encourage them to do that."

As was the case in all his previous projects, Glass campaigned to do as much practically as possible. "I like a mixture: I like trying to push for as much upfront, in camera with miniatures or special effects, and I use the backend for what it's really needed for."

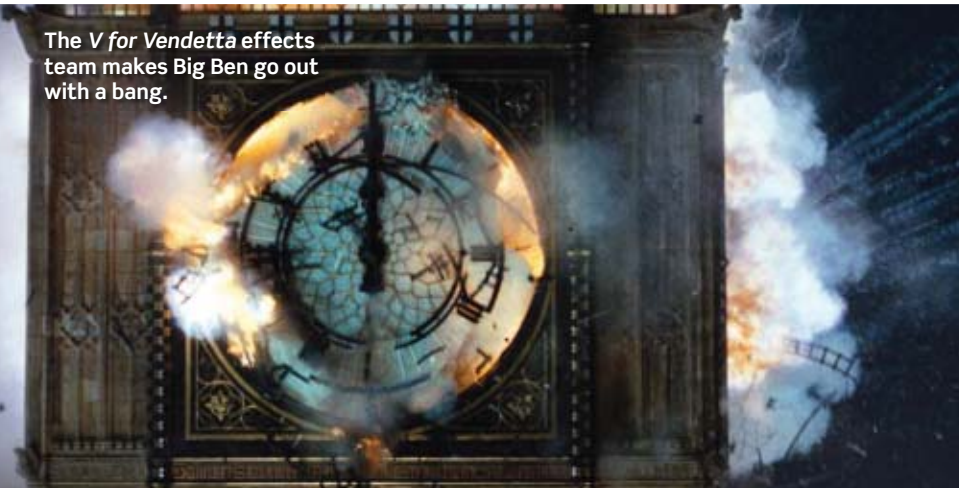
While *V for Vendetta* was never a huge vfx-driven project, its original 120 shots exploded. "We ended up with just shy of 500," Glass says, "but it's not as bad as it seems. It never set out to be a visual effects extravaganza. The original breakdown mainly dealt with the explosions. The other shots came up and grew and evolved in quite a natural way as we put the film together. Luckily we had the opportunity and the backing to go ahead with those."

In V's 1984-ish future, information is communicated via ever-present video screens, which comprised the majority of—if not the most complex—vfx shots. Among the most difficult were V's supposed destruction of two London landmarks, the House of Parliament and the Old Bailey, which Glass predictably asked Cinesite to blow up using vast miniatures. "We had a two-and-a-half week shoot just dedicated to miniatures," Glass says. "Old Bailey was about 20' tall and constructed very similarly to the real building, whose base is made of these very large stones that were laid in piece by piece – so we built each stone out of compressed plaster, which gets you the closest you can to reality. The idea is to match structurally using materials that match in scale. Big Ben,

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VISUAL EFFECTS

The *V for Vendetta* effects team makes Big Ben go out with a bang.



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Vendetta

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the House of Parliament's clock tower, stood about 26' tall, with a full roof façade that was about 10' tall."

When models are that intricate, do you get a take two? "In short—no," Glass laughs. "We built two models of the same thing, so we had two takes. We also had a two-day test, set up by Jose Granell, the director of models at Cinesite, where we tested various frame-rates, and from those tests we made the decision to shoot at different rates for each of the models. We were mostly shooting at 72 frames per second. We shot some stuff at 120. Very often people overcompensate with miniatures so that the shots come out looking slightly slow motion. That's what we didn't want to do: We wanted to keep it very raw and in real time, even if that meant sometimes you'd miss bits of the action, to give it a rougher, more realistic edge."

To complete the illusion, Cinesite merged live-action plates of the Thames and backgrounds tiled from stills into the miniature shots. While most things in visual effects are planned, some come up spontaneously, as with a knife fight between V and a dozen SWAT officers. "Larry and Andy wrote that sequence almost as we were shooting, which became quite a big chunk of additional work," Glass explains. "The whole scene was shot slightly slow motion, at 72 fps, to show how fast V moves. In most cases, the stuntmen were moving slightly slower than Hugo. The officers fire at him until their guns are empty, and in the time it takes them to reload, he takes out all twelve."

Glass recalls that the knife was moving so fast that as V twirled and wielded his knife it generated these wisps and streaks. "The idea was a cross between motion blur and streak," he notes. "So we got a visual effects art-

ist to sketch it, then took that to Cinesite who tracked the knife's motion and generated these CG textures that were composited to create the trails. They're quite subtle, and I really like them—they're not overly in your face; it's just a graceful element to this quite horrific scene as he's slashing and gouging blood."

Then there was the perennial issue of lighting V's scorching white mask, which drove the late cinematographer Adrian Biddle (*Aliens*; *The Princess Bride*; *V for Vendetta*, his last film) to distraction. "V's mask is very white, and his clothing, cape, hat and



to me and said, 'Can you help us?' To credit Adrian Biddle, he did a fantastic job of providing us the perfect reference and it ended up being a complete mixture of his photography and visual effects."

But it certainly wasn't status quo for the 30-plus mask shots. "We decided halfway through [production] that a digital intermediate was going to be necessary as a visual tool to put things together," Glass continues. "That process became this gray zone between strict visual effects and digital intermediate. So we scanned the mask, then tracked that shape back on the face, but rather than compositing the shadows we generated into

those mattes or alpha channels, we were able to control the lighting in the digital grading using digital effects. We could then layer in shadows to bring back the contours and detail, and in some cases, take it to a very high contrast to knock out one side so it becomes very dark and shadowed versus the bright side. It was a really good hybrid cross which allowed us to cast shadows at a very subtle level on his mask. Because the mask's a static shape, it's relatively straightforward: If the actor's face had been painted white, it would've been much more complex."

Dan Glass's "less is more" approach to visual effects is a refreshing change from the wholesale CGI that plagues some films these days—and it bodes well for his next project, the long awaited remake of *Logan's Run*. "That is a preference of mine, and perhaps it's why I get involved with the films I do, but it was certainly ap-

propriate for *V for Vendetta*. We used visual effects only where it was extremely necessary." ■

Ron Magid is a Los Angeles-based journalist who specializes in visual effects.

***V for Vendetta* opens in theaters on March 17. For more info, visit vforvendetta.warnerbros.com.**

"I like trying to push for as much [shots] upfront in camera with miniatures or special effects, and I use the backend for what it's really needed for."

—Visual effects supervisor James Glass

hair are very black, which has got to be a director of photography's worst nightmare," Glass agrees. "Adrian tried to retain some shadow information in the blacks, but the mask became this singing bright white object. Having watched a few dailies, James talked to Larry and Andy about it, then came



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Hair of the Dog

Tippett Studio puts the Wow! in bow wow for Disney's *The Shaggy Dog* redo. by Ryan Ball

Some prosthetic fur, strategic cut-aways and basic dissolve shots transformed young Tommy Kirk into a fluffy sheepdog in Disney's original *The Shaggy Dog* feature. And while that may have done the trick nicely in 1959, the 2006 remake required a bit more sophistication in the vfx department. To put a little wag in star Tim Allen's tail and unleash a host of other bizarre beasties, Disney this time turned to the creature effects experts at Tippett Studio, the shop behind the giant bugs from *Starship Troopers* and other groundbreaking feats of digital wizardry.

The new *The Shaggy Dog* is actually more like the mutt offspring of the '59 original and the 1976 follow-up, *The Shaggy D.A.* Allen is Dave Douglas, a workaholic deputy district attorney who takes on a case involving an animal laboratory and ends up with more than a little hair of the dog that bit him. With an experimental serum coursing through his veins, he finds himself looking at fire hydrants, cats and his family in a whole new light. Along the way, he makes some new friends in various animals that have also been given the genetically transforming cocktail.

"Some of the original challenges were technical issues like how we were going to animate a snake slithering while barking and wagging its tail," says Tippett lead animator Jim Brown. "It started out very serious, we were going to keep these things totally photoreal and all that stuff. But as the show went on, [Disney] saw the ability in some of our animators to bring out the humorous sides of these animals and they let us go in that direction."

For visual effects supervisor Thomas Schelesny, there was nothing funny about shooting reference footage of a real-life king cobra. After photographing the well-trained sheepdog and some cute bunnies, the Tippett team watched as two trainers picked up a big, heavy box and put it on the table.

Then one of the trainers looked at everybody and said, "I want everyone to look behind yourself and know your escape route. If I yell 'run', run for your lives." Schelesny tells us that no amount of Discovery Channel viewing could have prepared him for what happened next. "I can tell you unequivocally it was the most dangerous thing I was ever part of in my life," he states. "The head rose up out of the box and we all went, 'Oooh, ah-hhh!' Then all 12 feet of that snake slithered out of the box, off the table, onto the floor and straight toward us."

The actual snake can be seen in the background on a few shots in the film, but most

sure it didn't intersect stuff," he notes. "We wanted to keep the scenes light so we could actually animate because if you have the fur visible, it really slows down your animation scenes. So the puppet department came up with a really nice, low-res geometry that we were able to see in our scenes and get a representation of where the hair was at least going to be."

The crew animated with Maya and rendered with RenderMan, but used their own in-house fur system dubbed Furocious. The application was put to the test late in the production when it was decided that the sheepdog would have to surf. One of only



of the on-screen slithering was done by a fully CG serpent. "Our technical supervisor, Matt Robinson, came up with an idea to have scales on there that would contract and expand, and slide along the skin like a real snake's would," Brown remarks. "But [the rigging] became very heavy with the puppet. Our painters did an excellent job of painting the snake so we didn't really have to use specific geometry for scales. They just painted that thing like crazy and it looked phenomenal."

In the story, the snake develops a furry dog tail and a penchant for panting. Brown says the tail created the biggest fur challenge for the animators. "We had to make

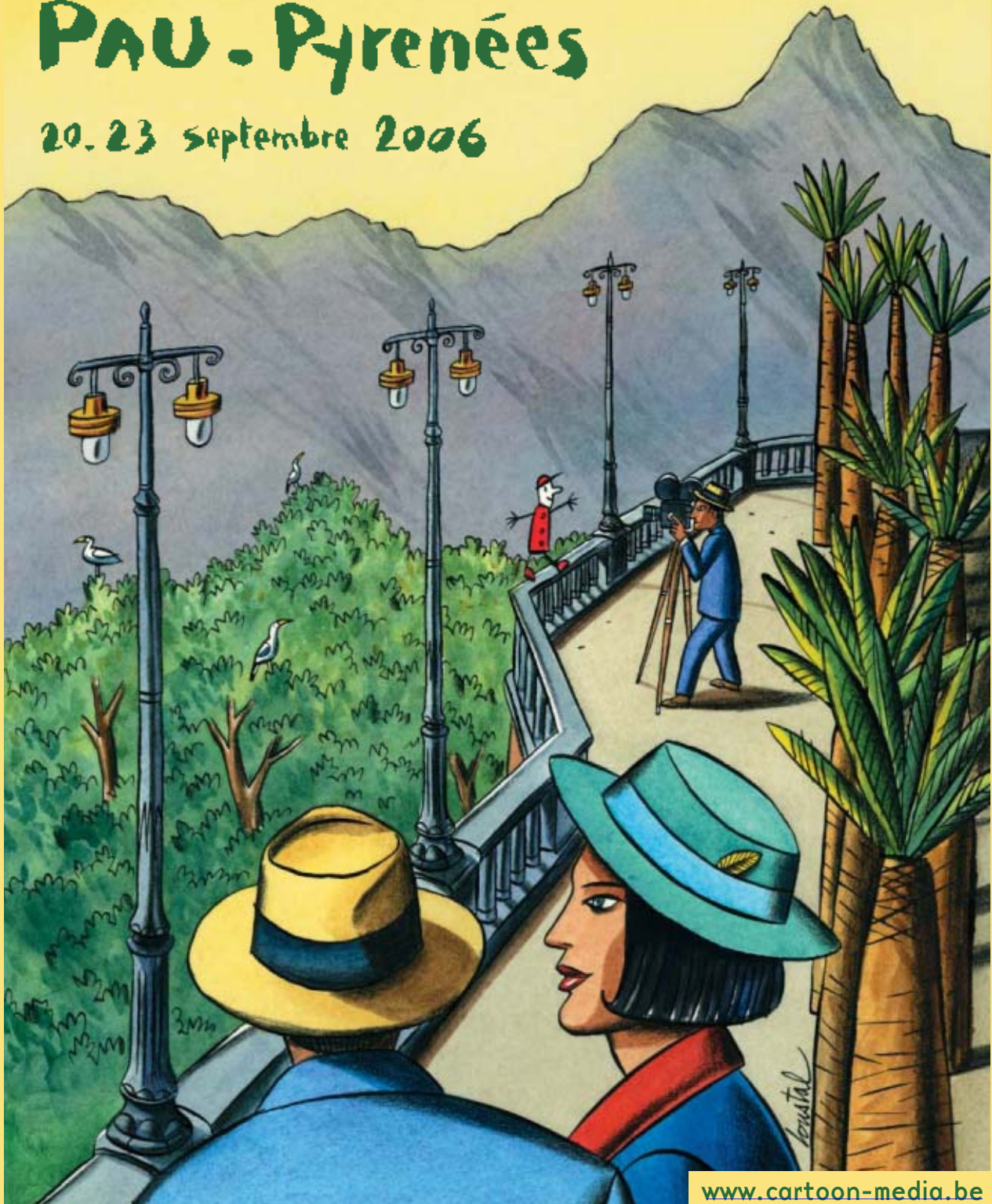
a couple shots involving a fully CG dog, the scene required the pooch's hair to interact with wind and water to extreme degrees. "We pretty much just used joint chains and surface-constrained the hair to the geometry," says puppet department head Eric Jeffries. "Then we put the joints on top of it and built a simple interface for the animators so they could control each hair."

Schelesny hastens to add that 'hair,' rather than 'fur,' is indeed the optimal word when dealing with their shaggy title character. He jokes, "The sheepdog has more in common with Cheryl Tiegs than it does a rat." ■

Disney lets *The Shaggy Dog* out in theaters nationwide on March 10.

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State of the Art

It's a Virtual Jungle Out There

Weta Digital's vfx experts used a variety of CG tricks to recreate the environmental shots of Skull Island for *King Kong*.
by Barbara Robertson

Last month's question was originally about the cemetery scene in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, but we killed that one when they didn't give us permission to run the photos! Willi Geiger saved the day with new questions about King Kong's Skull Island: How was the environment shot and put together? How much (if any) was shot on location in New Zealand? How heavily were green/bluescreen, miniatures, CG, etc., used? And, finally, how was everything integrated?

For the answers, we flew over the phone wires to New Zealand to talk with Weta Digital's Eric Saindon, digital effects supervisor. First thing to know is that almost nothing was shot on location. Second, green/bluescreen elements were used, particularly of Naomi Watts who played Ann Darrow. (Ann was also often a digital double.) Sets were built, but few turned out to be useful; most were replaced with digital environments.

In other words, Weta Digital handcrafted Kong's homeland using miniatures, digital paintings and 3D elements. Think about it. All of the island—from the village, to the jungle, the brontosaurus stampede, Kong's fight with the T-Rexes, Ann and Kong sit-

ting on a rocky ledge watching the beautiful sunset—all were handcrafted.

The Skull Island terra-formers started with miniatures: Two miniature units created around 15 large miniatures in sizes ranging from 10 feet by 10 feet to 50 feet by 30 feet. "They were our ground planes and starting points," says Eric.

The village relied the most on these models. "We did some digital extensions for the big wall that goes off into the distance," says Eric, "but for the most part, the village was all done with miniatures." To help make the miniature village seem real, the digital effects crew added volumetric atmosphere in RenderMan that was composited into the shots. "When Kong reaches for Ann, you can see his shadow in the atmosphere. These subtleties help bring the shots to life."

The jungle relied more on CG. Again, though, the digital crew began with footage taken of a miniature. "We took the camera move from the miniature and brought that into animation. Then we added Kong, the Brontos and other characters. From there, we tried to dress in the things they would interact with."

For trees, the crew used 2D tree elements as starting points. The trees were

shot with high-speed cameras, sometimes on their own, sometimes on miniatures. "If you shoot a miniature tree at high speed, it looks like a large-scale tree moving in the wind," says Eric. Sometimes, these 2D trees were used in the background—notably in the Kong-versus-T-Rex fight—with 3D trees in the foreground.

An in-house system called "Plant Builder" based on Autodesk's Maya 6.0's hair system generated the CG trees and other plants. The digital botanists started with one hair onto

which they built a piece of geometry that represented the trunk. Then, they repeated the process to create branches by connecting pieces of hair to points on the trunk and adding detail to the geometry to make it look like bark. They grew more branches from those branches, and so on, adding finer and finer details depending on the plant.

"We were able to create any plant we wanted," Eric says. "There are lots of new widgets and things in Maya to create shapes in new ways. By playing with the numbers, which determined how we grew hairs on the geometry, we could grow ferns, oak trees, pine trees, whatever the environment called for." And play they did: Skull Island was a fantasy, so none of the plants had to be botanically accurate.

Because the plants were built using Maya Hair, characters could interact with them. "We used the hairs for dynamics and collisions," Eric says. "We could have wind blowing through them, plants moving as creatures walked by and interaction between characters and plants."

Collisions are notoriously CPU-intensive, so the team came up with a trick to help speed the simulation: If anything got within a certain range of colliding geometry, it crushed the geometry straight down. When a Bronto stepped on a tree, rather than calculating all the collisions with all the hair branches in the tree; the software simply crushed it.

To further create the fantasy jungle and, in one dramatic sequence, give Ann and Kong something to swing from, the crew used a custom program to procedurally grow and drape vines on, over, around and hanging from any piece of geometry. The program started with a curve, and then extruded a circle along the curve. "We ran a



Beauty and the Beasts: The vfx team created a custom program to procedurally grow and drape vines on, over, around and hanging from any piece of geometry in the recreated fantasy jungle.



simple noise function through the geometry to add details like bumps and knots, and then used a shader to add procedural information," says Eric. "The closer you got, the more details were added by the shader. We didn't have to model any of the vines; we could procedurally dress the whole scene with this simple Maya program."

Last, to help give miniatures the correct scale, the technical directors used Maya Paint Effects to add small ferns, debris and other plants. "These plants didn't hold up close to camera, but they worked well for dressing the background," says Eric. Special procedures moved the Paint Effects geometry into Pixar's RenderMan for rendering.

In addition to the jungle, the team also created the cliffs that crumbled under the weight of the brontosaurus stampede. For this, they used BlastCode software from FerReel Animation Labs, a Maya plug-in that helped Kong break through the theater in

digital New York City. "Basically, we were able to model the cliff and, as the brontos came running toward it, used this software to break it apart and crumble it away," Eric says. "We then textured that data with the textures photographed from a miniature. We also used it to shatter the ground under Jimmy as he was running. I think he was one of the better digital doubles in the film."

For the beautiful sunset scene on the island shared by Kong and Ann, the crew modeled and painted a rocky ledge. "Once the animation got into the scene, the camera moves from the miniatures didn't match what Peter [Jackson] wanted," Eric says. "We dressed the rocks with Paint Effects, texture maps and some procedural shaders, but a lot of it was hand modeled and textured to work at the correct scale."

Putting all these pieces together required constant interaction between compositors and technical directors. Every day, the TDs

would hand new rendered elements to the compositors who would fit them into the shots with 2D elements. Then, every night the TDs wrote a one-line script that grabbed the latest animation, all the new elements, the lights and the latest compositing script. In the morning, the shots would land in the projection room. And, that made it possible to fabricate the island.

"We were able to get so many shots out because we could script all the information," Eric says. "We'd see the shots every day in dailies and decide what needed to move into 3D and what could stay in 2D."

We're happy to report that award-winning journalist Barbara Robertson will be launching an exciting new column in the next issue of Animation Magazine. Barbara will be focusing on some of the revolutionary visual effects work done in commercials, short form projects and TV series in her new monthly outing. ■



DIGITAL MAGIC



by Chris Grove

Calling All Robotech Fans

It might be a small part of the record industry's total revenue, but you can bet that music execs never saw that downloaded ring tones would become such a nice bit of change for their ailing industry. In 2005, according to a report in *USA Today*, ring tones (and related downloads) accounted for \$600 million of the industry's \$12 billion revenue, 20% more than had been projected the year before.

While hip-hop themes form the bulk of the downloads (2005's leader was 50 Cent's *Candy Shop*), there are lots of niches to fill. Enter Airborne Entertainment, which recently signed a deal to bring the famed anime series *Robotech* to a cell phone near you. Content for sale will include ring tones, ring back tones and personalized wallpaper. A mobile game will soon follow. Airborne's deal is with Harmony Gold USA, Inc. "I don't think (ring tones are) a fad," says Phil Leigh, president of Online's Inside Digital Media in the *USA Today* piece. "Those who lived without it think, 'Why do we need it?' But I remember when T-shirts were white. People want to make a statement. And ring tones offer that. I think we'll see growth."

For its part, *Robotech* content will be made available across major cell carriers this spring. "As the embrace between the



wireless community and the general entertainment world becomes tighter, we strongly believe that successful narrative franchises like *Robotech* will continue to cross over to mobile genres," says Andy Nulman, Airborne's president. The company's branded properties include *Family Guy*, *Maxim ToGo*, *SPEED TV Mobile*, *NHL Mobile* and *Donald Trump's Real Estate Tycoon*.

Softimage Animates the Southwest: On the software front, meanwhile, comes news that the Canuck division of Digital Dimension has selected Softimage's XSI software as the main 3D production tool for *The Legend of Secret Pass*.

The upcoming full-length animated feature, produced by JC2 Entertainment, is set in the American southwest and features a large cast of computer-generated animals and humans. Digital Dimension execs say XSI got the nod due to the software's advanced non-linear character workflow, customizable rendering tools and the extended memory capabilities of the 64-bit version 5.0 with its faster rendering times.

"(It's) the newest and most flexible 3D architecture available today," says Luc St-Onge, 3D supervisor at Digital Dimension, Canada. "The non-destructive character environment enabled our programmers and artists to start work as soon as we began building our CGI animation pipeline. This allows us to make changes and updates to the character models anytime we need to. The powerful character

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Tech Reviews

by Chris Tome

Wacom Cintiq 21UX

There are times in the computer and technology industry when a product is worthy of being dubbed a "paradigm shift" in the way people think about and use their tools. Although Wacom wasn't the first to come out with pressure sensitive drawing tablets (Calcomp and SummaGraphics were the first), the Vancouver, Wash.-based company was the first to, for example, create a cordless and battery free pen with much higher levels of pressure sensitivity than before.

Fast forward almost 20 years, and we can witness the forementioned paradigm shift with the Cintiq 21UX. It's an LCD screen that is pressure sensitive, and comes with a pen using 1,024 levels of sensitivity, which you draw or paint directly on the screen with. Although Wacom has had other displays like this, their size, resolution and price were, in my opinion, not worth it. The Cintiq 21UX changes all that.

Hooked up to my G5 and running at 1600X1200 resolution, this is one fantastic artistic tool. At \$2,999 it's not as cheap as a regular display, but what it offers in flexibility for CG artists more than makes up for the price. Working with the Cintiq gives you a kind of a rush you'll never get otherwise, and it makes drawing and painting in programs like Photoshop or Painter

so much better. You'll wonder how you lived without it after you bought it.

The Cintiq offers 21 inches of screen real estate and comes with a nice stand to sit it on a desk. The calibration software built into the driver allows you to set the display for the best pen-to-screen accuracy, and the pressure sensitivity of the pen, along with a program like Corel Painter, lets you use the natural media brushes in ways that truly approach their analog counterparts.

I also found it very handy to use in programs like Maya or LightWave. Selecting polygons, drawing splines or painting textures, it just seemed so much more real to me. Of course I know we're talking CG here, but it's the difference of using an application versus feeling as if you're inside of it.

I have the Cintiq set up on my PowerMac G5 as a second display, and although I don't always use the pen/display combo, I can easily use my mouse across both displays just as if it were a regular monitor. When I do want to do some artwork though, I simply pick up the pen and create as if I were putting pen directly to paper. It's a very liberating experience.

If what I have written so far hasn't convinced you, you may want to know about



some of the crew over at Pixar (now Disney/Pixar of course) who use them on a daily basis. Mark Andrews, story supervisor for *The Incredibles*, for example, now draws his storyboards pretty much exclusively on a Cintiq, whereas before he did it all with pencil, pen and paper. Brad Bird also utilized a Cintiq to critique dailies. (The footage viewed in the mornings after the previous nights' rendering.) When the footage was viewed, if Bird didn't like a pose or position of a character or element, he could use the Cintiq to draw over the frame, which would be superimposed on the image projected to the big screen. Then all the animators could instantly see what his vision was, the data could be saved off and the animators could go back to their work spaces and have a visual cue about what to change.

Going back to the paradigm shift, I predict that not too long from now every screen will be touch and pressure sensitive. It's a natural evolution, and one that's not hard to imagine at all. It's more natural and intuitive, and Wacom has truly led the way in this space. Even my four-year-old daughter, who never stops drawing or painting, fights me for access to the Cintiq, which is why I went ahead and actually purchased my loaner unit, because she'd throttle me if I sent it back. Once you have used one you'll understand the appeal, and you might just have to max out a credit card or two. I know I did!

Website: www.wacom.com

Price: \$2,999 ■

VISUAL EFFECTS

The Incredibles director Brad Bird used Cintiq to critic his feature's dailies.



Frederator's *My Life as a Teenage Robot*

Is That a Toon in Your Digital Pants Pocket?

Today's savvy animation producers don't expect instant riches as they prepare content for tomorrow's platforms.

by Chris Grove

If you attended any of the TV or new media confabs in the past six months, you know that the buzz about new media platforms has become deafening of late. However, perhaps because the moguls of media were so badly burned during the heyday of the dotcom boom, not everyone is waxing eloquent about the obsession du jour: Podcasting. "How many people really want to get video on a tiny screen when they already have TiVo or a similar service from their cable company or DirecTV?" Rupert Murdoch opined in *Newsweek* last month. "How many will want to pay \$1.99 on Monday morning if they missed *Desperate Housewives* the night before? What's been announced so far with iPod and Disney and NBC is very small-time at the moment."

Maybe. But just because you've built one of the biggest media empires in history, doesn't mean one's exempt from getting one's facts straight. The

vast majority of podcasts are free, not a buck ninety-nine. So, as it turns out, those with video-enabled devices (whether iPods, MP3 players, a Mac, PC or otherwise) are downloading like so many caffeinated college file-sharers. According to figures supplied by the Pew Research Center For the People & Press, 87% of 12- to 17-year-olds use the Internet. And for those us who actually have to ride the bus, commuter

"TV execs have always been the gatekeeper that prevented so many talented people from getting their stuff seen. Podcasting is one more way around the distribution monopoly of the major entertainment companies."

—John Evershed, CEO and co-founder of Mondo Media, producer of *Happy Tree Friends*

train or subway once in a while (or sit in the airport lounge) a little small-screen entertainment can go a long, long way to blocking out the guy across from

us, narrating his day into his cell. "(Podcasting) is not a gimmick," says Richard Doherty, director of the New York-based high tech consultant firm Envisioneering. "Snatch-and-run" is a whole new business model."

And it's not a new distribution system that has, despite first appearances, a generational divide. While toons from FrederatorStudios, Mondo Media, the Walt Disney Company and others big and small are hot p'cast properties, it's important to note that among the top downloads on podcasts.yahoo.com, for example, are snippets of the 40-plus skewing National Public Radio magazine show *All Things Considered*. In the last two months of 2005 NPR recorded more than four million downloads. "If there is a divide, it's between early adopters and the rest of us," says Fred Seibert, president of Frederator. In addition to overseeing the creation of many Nickelodeon hits (*Fairly OddParents*, *ChalkZone*, *My Life As a Teenage Robot* and more), Siebert has a storied past launching brands such as MTV, VH-1 and Nickelodeon itself. Down-



John Evershed



Fred Seibert

One Man
Band

Pixar shorts can be downloaded on iTunes for \$1.99 each.

in the early days of the Web, free content is a good thing. Paradoxically, by charging nothing for iTunes downloads, Apple chief Steve Jobs is making iTunes more valuable than ever. "It's a great marketing tool," Seibert continues. When you command the loyalty of tens of millions of users the pay-off down the line can be huge. Just ask the guys that founded Google.

Currently there are four business models that may individually or in combination provide a long-term *raison d'être* for podcasting—ad supported content; promotional support (podcast shorts acting as promotion for a big screen film, for example); selling best of DVD compilations of web-only content; and finally, using podcasting as a tool for audience-building for properties that *do* generate revenue.

In many ways, podcasting is analogous to the syndication of the popular Peanuts comics strip in the 1960s and 1970s. The syndication didn't yield Charles M. Schultz nearly as much money as the TV shows, films, plush toys and other consumer products made possible by the mass audience the daily strip put together. "If we have to do this with micro-transactions of five cents per download that will be fine," says Evershed. A nickel may be peanuts to Murdoch, but multiply that times a million and pretty soon you're talking real money—at least for a struggling animator.

The current scope of the podcast universe is hard to measure—both in size and ratings. Doherty estimates that there are currently 25 million video-enabled devices smaller than a PC enjoying video from podcasting. To this point, Nielsen Net ratings

and others have yet to come up with an independently verifiable way to count heads and traffic in the podcast space.

But says Troy Snyder, president and CEO of San Diego-based Nine Systems, at this moment in the revolution that doesn't matter so much: "The tools are here now to provide interactive content catering to specific communities of users." Which, he continues, bodes well for smallish to mid-level animators who can now target their material to communities of consumers with shared interests. Nine Systems streams video and audio to over 175 million unique users monthly for clients including Universal Music Group, Amazon.com, the Sundance Festival, Fox and Anheuser-Busch.

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boomers is so complete that we can't stand the fact that advertisers don't think we're important."

Because many media companies are run by said baby boomers, Seibert believes that there'll be a lot of content aimed at and used by the over 50 crowd—animated, live-action, news and sports and more.

For its part, Channel Frederator is dedicated to discovering and distributing the work of animators worldwide. As far as independent content providers are concerned, podcasting is one of the biggest developments since the onset of the digital video revolution in the mid 1990s. "TV execs have always been the gatekeeper that prevented so many talented people from moving forward and getting their stuff seen," says John Evershed of Mondo Media. "Podcasting is one more way around the distribution monopoly of the major entertainment companies." Mondo's *Happy Tree Friends* is currently the fourth most popular download on iTunes.

But wait a minute. Where's the money? "I have no idea," says Seibert. As



NEW MEDIA

Podcast

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With wireless data transfer rates continuing to grow exponentially and the affordability and storage capacity of portable data transfer devices (such as FireWire and USB drives) becoming ever more astounding, Doherty has three words for podcasters to look forward to in the next 12 months: High Definition Podcasting. Among other things, IBM is reportedly ready to introduce a 60 GHz router that'll download data 50 times faster than WiFi. At that almost ridiculously fast rate, it'll be possible to download a one-hour movie in 15 seconds.

Fifteen years ago a portable comput-

er with a 40-mega-byte hard drive, four MB of RAM and a 28-baud exterior modem was considered state-of-the-art. In 2006, says Doherty, we're in the era of the digital pants pocket, where "me media" is king, as in: My media, my time, at the place of my choosing. In such an environment, Doherty continues, Rupert Murdoch is asking the wrong question. "It's clearly not whether consumers want entertainment on a tiny screen, it's how do we get it to them and how fast can we meet that need." ■



Aardman has made 35 episodes of its *Morph* series available for mobile phones.

Digital Magic

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rigging and animation tools, the integration of SyFlex cloth and mental ray rendering technology, plus the customizable render passes, made choosing XSI an easy decision."

Scheduled for release in late 2007, *The Legend of Secret Pass* is an international production with teams in several countries collaborating with Digital Dimension's studios in Montreal, the director and design/storyboarding team in Sydney, Australia, and post-production operations in Los Angeles.

Brit Cels Try Out TDTV: And one more blast over Rupert Murdoch's bow, who trashed podcasts earlier this year by questioning how many people were *really* interested in watching entertainment or news on a tiny screen. IPWireless has announced plans to make British-based cell phone carrier Orange the first UMTS operator to Beta-test the new IPWireless TDTV technology later this year. The software is a mobile TV and multimedia solution based on the 3GPP Multimedia Broadcast and Multicast Services (MBMS) standard.

Why is this a big deal? Because it'll make it possible for cell phone carriers to stream more content at higher resolutions, which, in turn, makes it more likely that even

The Legend of Secret Pass features CG work by Digital Dimension.



LSP Character Copyright J.C.Z

more people will be downloading and podcasting to their heart's content. According to IPWireless execs, TDTV will allow mobile operators to deliver up to 50 channels of TV for standard cell phone screens or 17 higher-res channels. Unlike current unicast mobile TV services, which take additional network bandwidth for every subscriber, TDTV will allow an unlimited number of customers to watch the same channel or use the same network bandwidth. With TDTV, Orange would also be able to deliver digital audio, multicast or other IP data cast services to enhance their service offerings. "We believe that the un-

matched combination of performance and economics has the potential to put Orange in the lead in the emerging mobile multimedia market," says Dr. Bill Jones, IPWireless' COO.

The company's TD-CDMA technology has become a leading global standard for wireless broadband. The company says T-Mobile, Orange, Sprint, PCCW and others will soon be deploying the standard in their systems. If they get any better at this stuff and they start making a lot of money for their clients, IPWireless may find itself to be an attractive take-over possibility. Even by the Murdoch-led News Corp. ■

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Pulcinella Awards

STUDIO VITALE

The Toast of Sundance:

left to right, back row:
Konstantin Abadjiev, Ariel
Alvarez, David Chai, Wally Der
front row: Tim Heitz, Lauren
Andrews, Sophorn Sin



School Project Shines at Sundance

San Jose State University puts its best *Foot* forward.
by Ellen Wolff

Fumi and the Bad Luck Foot might be one of the more enigmatic titles shown recently at Sundance, but it also shows that the animation program at San Jose State University is on solid footing. *Fumi*, a traditionally animated short that presents a comic twist on the power of superstition, was directed by SJSU instructor David Chai. But it reflects the efforts of 20 students—freshman and seniors—who spent 55 summer days producing the seven-minute film.

Having *Fumi* selected from among 4,000 short films submitted to Sundance was all the more remarkable when you consider that it was made in one room at San Jose State. Chai admits, "People were amazed that we did it there. We used our laptops with Flipbook and little web-cams taped to sticks."

Hardware donated by HP was in the process of being set up at the school, but the looming Sundance deadline meant *Fumi* couldn't wait. Chai recalls, "For the most part, we scanned our drawings by bringing in machines from home.

It was as bare bones as you could get." Some participants earned intern credits, while others just worked for the experience—and the free pizza supplied by Chai.

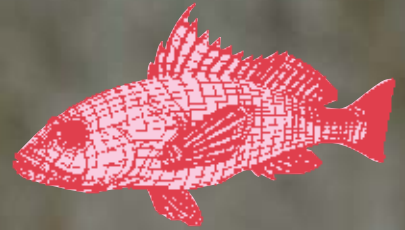
One major technical advantage was that a previous Chai-organized SJSU short, *Neighborhood Roots*, had been a finalist in the Adobe Design Achievement Awards. That earned the school multiple copies of Adobe's Video Collection, which included Photoshop, Premiere Pro, After Effects, Encore DVD and Audition. Because *Fumi* used Adobe products, the company sponsored Sundance presentations given by Chai's students. (Adobe even found Park City hotel rooms for them so they wouldn't have to bunk in a friend's basement.)

The ability of these students to handle *Fumi* presentations with aplomb is a direct result of SJSU's approach to education, believes Chai. "Our students are used to presenting their ideas well because they participate weekly in the ACME long-distance learning component that we have."

That program, created by Dave Master, presents online sessions with industry pros from studios like Pixar, DreamWorks and Disney. Chai explains, "It's a very symbiotic part of our curriculum. Profes-

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you'll never go hungry.



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Corey Tom (left) and Andrew Ho (right), flip away their summer!



Fumi and the Bad Luck Foot

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sional animators look at student work ranging from story to layout to animation. It's been instrumental in raising the bar at San Jose State."

Chai, who graduated from the school with an illustration degree, stresses the strides that SJSU's animation program has made during its 10-year history. "One cool thing is that the main people running it—Bunny Carter and Courtney Granger—both have illustration backgrounds. So drawing is a huge part of our program. It's really a testament to their dedication that we've had such strong results in animation. Our graduates work at ILM, Blue Sky, Pixar, Film Roman, DreamWorks, Disney and gaming companies like Electronic Arts and Sony Games.

For such a small school with a limited budget, it's amazing that we have such a high success rate."

Chai also thinks that one of the strengths of the program is its diversity. "Our *Fumi* crew had Bulgarians, Canadians, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, Cambodians and Argentineans. It's really a melting pot here. Since it's a state college, the tuition is cheap compared to lots of private schools."

While SJSU offers classes in both traditional and computer animation, Chai says, "We don't try to push either one. What we do impress on students is that the way they work in our curriculum is a direct reflection of how they will work professionally. I think group projects provide crucial experiences for students, especially in their younger years. And working on *Fumi and Neighborhood Roots*, I could tell the guys I'd want to hire right off the bat."

"People were amazed that we did it there [in one room at San Jose State]. We used our laptops with Flipbook and little web-cams taped to sticks!"

—David Chai, San Jose State University instructor and director of *Fumi and the Bad Luck Foot*

That opportunity could actually arise, since Chai is a partner in Thunderbean Animation (which he calls a wall-less studio) that has worked on projects for Disney, Warner Bros. and Hasbro. "If a job came in through Thunderbean, I know I could pick students who would do it well.

I would never want to exploit them, so whenever Thunderbean gets assignments that I can refer students to, it's one of the greatest rewards to be able to pay them."

Which is quite a stretch from the free pizza pipeline that fueled the making of *Fumi and the Bad Luck Foot*. San Jose's animation program itself has also flourished since the one-room *Fumi* production last summer. It now benefits from a variety of industry-donated gear—from Electronic Arts and DreamWorks Animation as well as Adobe and HP.

All of which has Chai thinking big about future student films. "I'd like to see them pick up the baton and have ten projects coming out every summer. We have so many artists with crazy ideas. They even have a cool animation club (ShrunkenHeadMan.com)

that shows what a great creative culture we have. Of course when you have no money, you have to be creative!" ■

Ellen Wolff is a Los Angeles-based journalist who focuses on visual effects and related academic programs.



Team Fumi: left to right, back row: David Coffman, John Paul Balmert, Megan Kelly, Amie Chan, Konstantin Abadjiev, Ji-Hea Yang
front row: Wally Der, Ping Wei Luo, Patrick Roth



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Writing for Animation? Draw on Experience.

A toon biz veteran offers some practical advice on how to create the right scripts for cartoons. **by Fred Crippen**

Having worked in animation for over half a century, I've learned a thing or two about the process—every part of the process. I've worked with UPA, Hanna-Barbera, Disney, DIC, Sony and countless others in my years in the business.

I've been an inbetween, assistant animator, animator, animation director, director and a series creator. When it comes to 2D animation, there's not a single aspect of the business I haven't done. And I continue to work actively even today. Yes, after 50 years in animation, I have not yet drawn my last breath as a working animator and director (pun intended).

While there has been a lot written in these pages about the art and science of animation, there is one job in animation that doesn't get much play. That would be the art of writing for animation.

There is something that's not often examined when learning the art of animation, and that is the challenge that inexperienced writers can pose to animators themselves.

Not all animation projects have the seemingly unlimited resources of a Disney, Pixar or DreamWorks. In fact, the vast majority of animation work is done for television or DVD release. On these projects, budgets can be tight.

Writing for animation is not the same as writing for live-action. You have to remember that when writing scenes for animation, everything has to be drawn. Every character, every movement, every prop every element of every scene has to be brought to life by the animators.

So, when a writer not accustomed to working in this field suggests a character run into a house of mirrors in a scene, he or she would be quite unaware of the enormous amount of work it would take.

I remember an episode of *Skyhawks* that was done by a fairly new writer. There was a scene where the writer had a circus train crash and he had all these zebras, leopards, tigers and giraffes and so on running around the train. If you've done any animation at all, you'll see the problem immediately. All those spots and stripes running hither and yon were a bit beyond the animation budget of *Skyhawks*. I've had hundreds of similar experiences in my many years in the business.

On the flip side would be something like the project I'm

currently working on, an educational animated TV series for preschool children called *Betsy's Kindergarten Adventures*. It's a delightful series with some of the best voice actors in the business today. Just as important, if not more to me, is that the project is employing the talents of top-notch writers who are veteran writers for animation.

The stories they are turning out are first class in terms of being entertaining while educating. Even better, their experience in writing for animation saves me significant time in pre-production. With skilled writers on board, tapping and pre-production move much more quickly and painlessly.

You see, writing for animation is a skill best acquired by being involved in the business over a long time, learning the ropes. Remember, all the scenes a writer might envision have to be drawn, one frame at a time. The more

that are not central to the story. It is important to really know the project you are working on. Focus on the key objectives of the project and wean out those things in the script that aren't essential to telling the story.



Fred Crippen

Another sign of the new animation writer is seen in character motion. In live-action, moving a person from point A to point B is a fairly simple process. In animation, motion is naturally more complex. A writer can add countless hours of animation by having characters doing unnecessary walk-ins and walk-outs. Knowing when these are needed and when they would be unnecessarily costly is the mark of a real pro.

New animation writers will also have trouble with script length. Being a little over or under is generally no big deal. But, if you as a writer are submitting scripts several minutes over or under, know that this does add work for the director and can lead to costly delays. There is no cutting-room floor in animation. You don't draw more than you need and then cut from there. Timing is critical, and a good animation writer has a good sense of timing.

Giving clear direction in the script is also very important. For example, in one daydream scene on another project I worked on, the writer had a character standing on a clock and then being swept off by the moving hands. Unfortunately, the writer failed to describe where "on" the clock was. Was the character on top of the clock, or was the character on the face? What did the writer actually envision here? So, if you are writing a scene like this, picture it in your mind, and then convey that in the script. A little direction can save the director valuable time.

Finally, I'll leave you with this one tip I give to all new writers I work with. Watch cartoons, all kinds of cartoons. Watch as much as you can. And as you watch, look at how the various scenes are done. I've gotten great ideas on how to cut work, without cutting quality or story integrity, by watching others' work. You can learn much from observing the work of the many animation pros who are applying their hard-won experience to this industry. ■

Fred Crippen is an animation veteran whose career stretches from UPA in the early '50s to the films he produces at his studio Pantomime Pictures today. His numerous credits include *Roger Ramjet*, *Hot Wheels*, *Square One TV* and the upcoming series, *Betsy's Kindergarten Adventures*.



complex the scene, the more time spent in animation.

As an example, in one scene of a show I was working on, a character and her mother were going to the park and the writer had a carnival going on with lots of people, rides, attractions and so on. He'd gone into great detail on this carnival scene, and it was a really nice one. But the writer didn't realize the amount of extra work that would be required to animate the scene.

Since the scene was not really central to the story line, I simply cut it and turned it into a simple shot of mom in the car announcing they were now at the park and then a cut to an exterior shot showing the car drive under a "Park" sign.

This is a mistake typical of writers new to animation. It's easy to get carried away with adding lots of details



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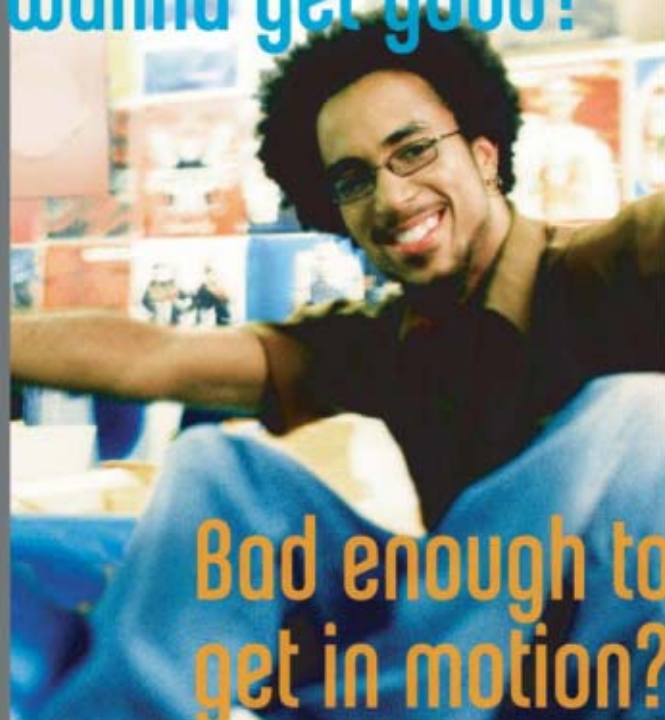
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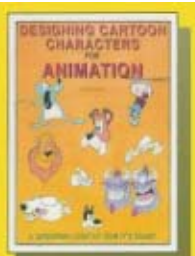
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Animation Magazine Congratulates the 2006 Gamer's Rad Pack Winners!

Thanks to all the readers who participated in our online poll for the best games of the past year. Gamers and industry pros logged on to www.animationmagazine.net and picked this year's winners in various categories. Look for interviews with the winners in the next issue of the magazine.

Best Console Game (Tie)

Call of Duty 2: Big Red One
[Activision/Treyarch]
Resident Evil 4
[Capcom/Capcom Production Studio 4]

Best PC Game

World of Warcraft
[Vivendi Universal Games/Blizzard Ent.]

Best Handheld Game

Nintendogs
[Nintendo]

Best Cut Scene Cinematic Animation

Ratchet & Clank: Deadlocked
[Sony Computer Entertainment America/Insomniac Games]

Best Character Design

Ultimate Spider-Man
[Activision/Treyarch]

Best Overall Game Animation

Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie
[Vivendi Universal Games/Ubisoft]

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Keeping with the Asian focus of the issue, we asked the fun-loving folks at Singapore's **Peach Blossom Media** to give us a little show-and-tell. Among the toon house's credits are *Tomato Twins* and the upcoming series *Tao Shu - The Warrior Boy*.



Lingun Sung, CEO of Peach Blossom, shows us his favorite dance move, "The Running Man."



Noor, our production assistant, having her daily chats with her best friends in the office.



Sean, our animator, reveals his true feelings for inflatable dolls.



Our modest, tiny patch on the "Wall of Fame"



Mini-Lingun takes the hot seat when Big Lingun goes on his frequent L.A. trips.



Linli, our producer, visits the medical shop downstairs wonders which chinese remedy she'll try today. Yesterday's seahorse and black fungus soup just didn't quite cure her cold.



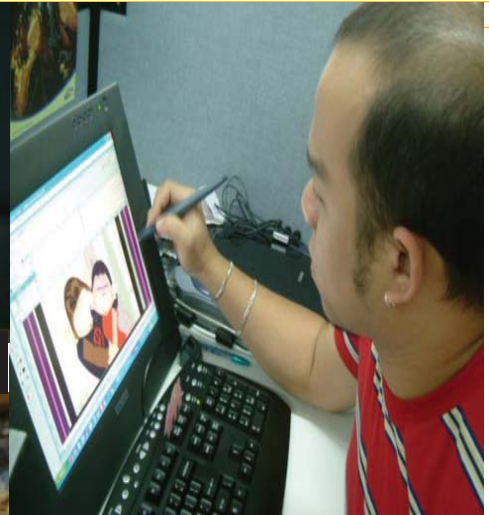
Yippee! Found it. Lingzhi Mushrooms and Dangshen...apparently it's good for the spleen and the occasional nose bleed.



Hmmm, all I need now is a hammock and a sexy thong...



You see, in paragraph four, section 2(b), it clearly says that employees can bring in furry pets.



Sean's designing an e-card for his mother. Now he's got to get her a computer.



Toon, our business manager, sits and ponders his lunch options, chicken rice, satay or laksa?



Andy, our writer, with his version of "curling up with a good read."



Danny, our animation director, brainstorms with some of our other colleagues.

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